

BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING MOUNTAIN BIKE MAGAZINE

NOV 2015
ISSUE 322

Mountain Biking UK[®]

**STAY SHARP
ALL WINTER**

15 TIPS TO BEAT THE COLD



GNARLFEST

**'ARD ROCK
ENDURO**

Why everyone wants
to grab an entry

ADVENTURE

EPIC ETHIOPIA

A wilder ride than you'd
ever imagine

**HOW TO HOP
LIKE A HERO**

**CAN SMALLER BRAND
BIKES DELIVER BIG?**

**FLATS OR CLIPS – WHAT ARE THE
BEST PEDALS YOU CAN BUY?**

**HIT THE
ROUGH
STUFF**

STAY IN CONTROL ON
**ROCKS, ROOTS AND
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Rising 20,000 feet from the floor of the Atlantic, Madeira is one of those places you may have heard of but probably couldn't pinpoint on a map. Portuguese sailors claimed the island in the thirteenth century and it soon became synonymous with their fortified wine.

Steep volcanic ridge lines now host a potent playground of trails that are built and maintained by the local riding community. Located 280 miles off the coast of West Africa, we dispatched Josh Bryceland to rally this remote spot on a new bike that can do it all.



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VOLTSERIES



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The riding in the Dales is very different to down south, but Matt, Jimmer and Seb all had a blast at the 'Ard Rock



EDITOR'S LETTER

Take on a different kind of terrain



It's great to get out and explore the different riding the UK has to offer. A few of our Bristol-based MBUK team had never been riding up in the Yorkshire Dales before. So what better introduction to its stunning landscapes than taking part in the aptly named 'Ard Rock Enduro right in the heart of Swaledale? It's a truly beautiful part of the UK, with soft rolling hills, green pastures and glacial valleys stretching for miles. But it can also appear bleak and harsh, with its exposed underlying limestone and landscapes that bear the scars of its mining past. Riding it was a completely different experience to anything they'd tackled before but they all came away grinning and desperate to return. Head to page 82 to find out what made it so special for each of them. Maybe it'll inspire you to sign up for next year's event or just head off for a totally new riding adventure. Enjoy the issue!

Danny

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Danny Walter MBUK Editor in Chief

* Pull-out maps not available to overseas readers

MBUK INSTANT INDEX



Rider Kamil Tatarkovic Bike Commencal Meta AM Photo Dan Milner

75 THE GEOMETRON

Could this new bike make all the difference to your ride?

80 WINTER WARMERS

Don't let the colder weather and short days stop your rides. Stay positive and warm till spring.

108 RARE BREED BIKES

Smaller brand bikes can offer individuality but do they give you a better ride?

142 FIX YOUR HEADSET

Is your bike in need of a new headset? Here's how to swap in a new one in 16 easy steps.

24 SEASON FINALES

The big events are winding down but have left us with some great memories. These are our faves.

70 NEW GEAR NOW!

The very best bikes and kit for 2016. How the hell are we gonna afford it all? Best get saving!

**THE STUFF
YOU HAVE TO
GO TO FIRST!**



MBUK NOVEMBER ISSUE 322

CONTENTS



14 TOO HARD TO HANDLE?

Dan Atherton's Hardline lives up to its fearsome reputation

16 CLI-MACHX 10 YEARS ON

This sweet singletrack in North Wales is a hidden gem with a sting in the tail

17 OLD TECH, NEW APPLICATION

Water-operated disc brakes and hydraulic shifting. Whatever next?

18 ANOTHER BRIT FLYING HIGH

This young 4X star has his sights set on the Enduro World Series

20 CARBON TRAIL HOOPS

Stan's new Bravo wheelset has the Athertons' stamp of approval



23 SENDER CITY

We look ahead to the insanity that is Red Bull Rampage

24 ONE HELLUVA YEAR

Our top five mountain biking moments of the year to date

26 BEST OF: QUANTOCKS

Enduro racer Rob Newman on the ace riding in this mini hilly nirvana

36 YETI'S NEW 29ER

Light, fast and capable – our first thoughts on the SB4.5c trail bike

24 COLUMN: INNES GRAHAM

25 A-Z OF MTB: LAPIERRE

25 60-SECOND COACH: BUNNYHOP

29 BIKEPEDIA: XC FULL-SUSSEY

30 THANK GOD... SEALED BEARINGS

30 THAT WAS THEN: DH GEARING

33 LIVING THE DREAM

34 RETAIL THERAPY: JACKETS

35 INDUSTRY INSIDER: NIGEL PAGE



ETHIOPIAN ODYSSEY 64

Extreme riding in an awesome location

FEATURES

64 TIME TRAVELLERS

An epic journey along ancient paths through the high mountains of Ethiopia

70 NEXT YEAR'S KIT

Shiny stuff to get excited about. Start saving now...

75 RADICAL RIDE

The Mojo/Nicolai GeoMetron is long, low, slack and fast – but is it a game changer?

80 10 TO TRY IN 2015 #9 RIDE THROUGH WINTER

Top tips to keep riding when the mercury heads south

82 ROCK STARS

Four MBUK staffers take on the gnarly beast that is Yorkshire's 'Ard Rock Enduro

REGULARS

41 SEND IT!

Made by you – letters, comments and your best riding photos



44 FIRST RIDES

Featuring: Corsair Toro, Scott Voltage FR 710, Mondraker Dune Carbon XR

50 FIRST LOOK

The hottest new bikes and gear hitting the shelves soon

57 SUPERBIKE

Anneke Beerten's Specialized S-Works Enduro 29

39 MINT SAUCE

60 SUBSCRIBE

162 NEXT MONTH

108 BIKE TEST





82 ROCK STARS

MBUK take on Yorkshire's 'Ard Rock Enduro



75 ANGLE OF ATTACK

We ride the radically long and slack GeoMetron



70 2016 GEAR

Our pick of next year's top kit



57 SUPERBIKE

Specialized S-Works Enduro 29



124 GROUPTEST



102 MBUK MACHINES



91 NEW TESTS

MBUK WRECKED & RATED

91 NEW TESTS

Our test team report back on the latest batch of new products

100 SIX OF THE BEST

Rechargeable rear lights rated

102 MBUK MACHINES

Team bikes – where we've ridden, what we've changed and broken!

108 BIKE TEST

Fancy something different? We throw a leg over four small-brand hardtails

124 GROUP TEST

Fourteen sets of pedals, both flats and clips, given a thrashing



136 **HOW TO**



152 **WRECKING CREW**

MBUK Manual

136 HOW TO...

The Fundamentals: Master Technical Trails – nail bunnyhops and manuals to keep your flow on steep natural terrain

142 GRIMETIME

Got a creak or wobble? Here's how to replace your headset

144 ASK MBUK

We sort your problems. Plus how to neaten up frayed gear cables

146 THE BIG RIDE

We go remote and rugged around the Nant yr Arian trail hub in Mid Wales. Plus four route maps

152 WRECKING CREW

Hadleigh Park in Essex is home to the London 2012 Olympic XC track – we give it our best shot



144 **ASK MBUK**



146 **BIG RIDE**

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MBUK Out Front

THE **FIVE STORIES** LEADING
THE WAY THIS MONTH

RED BULL HARDLINE

01

Too hard to handle?

02

03

04

05

They came, they rode, they just about survived... Dan Atherton's gargantuan creation, the Red Bull Hardline, returned bigger than ever this autumn.

Designed to test the limits of what's possible in downhill racing, this fearsome track drew 14 riders including World Cup stars Rémi Thirion, Joe Smith and Bernard Kerr to the small village of Dinas Mawddwy in North Wales. Come race day, only eight competitors remained.

What makes this event so hard? Red Bull Rampage boasts bigger jumps and there are longer tracks on the World Cup circuit, but it's the combination of

these features that gives Hardline its fearsome reputation. "You've got to get three or four things in line, and it's right on the limits of what's possible," said former junior world champ Ruaridh Cunningham. "You've got to get everything perfect. Combine that into a full run, where you're fatigued, and it's really challenging."

But could Dan have pushed things too far this year? An intensely technical track combined with temperamental Welsh weather meant that by the finals no one bar his brother Gee had managed a complete run. Casualties littered the run-up to the race, with Dan himself taken out with a broken

shoulder blade after landing badly on one of his monster hip jumps. Taylor Vernon injured his foot. Kye Forte took a knock to the head. That left Gee, Joe, Ruaridh, Bernard, Adam Brayton, Al Bond (pictured), Craig Evans and Reece Wilson.

The younger Atherton's untouchable times in practice came to nothing, with a flat near the top echoing his performance in 2014. In the end, Ruaridh was the victor with a run that was more about survival than style. "To link it all together and make it to the bottom was pretty challenging," he told us. "I'm happy to be going back to Scotland safe!"



A Cli-MachX worth waiting for

The Cli-MachX trail near Machynlleth is easily missed – though only half an hour down the road from Coed-y-Brenin, a small sign with a picture of a bike is the only indication of its presence and there are no facilities beyond a small car park and map board – but it's an old favourite with those in the know and recent repair work means there's never been a better time to check it out.

The 15km loop doesn't get off to a promising start with an extended fireroad climb, but short diversions off road make the gravel-track

grinding a bit more bearable. These become more frequent as you make your way up the hill and you soon find yourself sailing along some sweet, natural-feeling singletrack.

It's the final downhill section that this trail is famous for though. While its claim to be the longest in Wales is now under threat from the 4.2km Terry's Belly at BikePark Wales, the Dyfi Forest descent is definitely more challenging, with plenty of rocks and some tight berms to keep you on your toes. The exposed end section comes as a bit of a surprise – felling means the trail looks completely different to

when it opened in 2005 – but it's a blast to ride and over all too soon.

With more trail work scheduled to take place in the near future – including plans to make the final section even more exciting – Cli-MachX is well worth a visit if you've got a couple of hours to spare in North Wales and want to get away from the Coed-y crowds. In fact, its relatively low profile means you may well find yourselves the only ones riding it. There are loads of other trails in the forest too. Just remember to pack some sarnies! 
www.dyfimountainbiking.org.uk





WATER & OIL TECH

Alternatives to electronics

With all the hype over electronic shifting and suspension, it's been interesting

to see some brands at the autumn's big trade shows turning to more old-fashioned technologies that don't require computer chips to operate.

Bigger pistons, better seals, cooling fins and higher fluid volumes mean today's disc brakes don't overheat as badly as they used to. But Germany's BrakeForceOne think there's more work to be done in this area. They've developed a brake that relies on water instead of hydraulic fluid to operate the pistons.


Why? They say that because water has a higher thermal capacity and less thermal expansion than

oil it's the perfect material to use in brakes that are exposed to a wide range of temperatures. And there's no need to worry about the brakes freezing in cold weather – glycol is added to the water to prevent this.

It's an unusual idea but we can think of some side benefits – how about being able to do a cheeky brake bleed on the trail with your hydration pack?! Plus it would mean no more messing around with nasty DOT fluid. But it does beg the question that if water works so well as a brake fluid, why do cars, trucks and motorbikes all use oil?

On the subject of oil, SRAM and Shimano may be throwing their weight behind electronic transmissions but another German company, Acros,

reckon that the future of mountain bike shifting lies in hydraulics. They've been developing their mineral oil based system for several years now, the main claimed benefit being reduced friction. And they're not the only ones thinking along these lines – Spanish company Rotor have just unveiled a hydraulic road groupset, and like with their elliptical chainrings and cranks, we wouldn't be surprised to see them bring out a mountain bike version further down the line.

It does make us wonder though. With hydraulics adding additional expense and bleeding hassle, are we getting to the point in the evolution of bikes where we're beginning to come up with solutions for problems that don't really exist? 

01

02

03

04

05

LUKE CRYER

The 4X star flying under the radar

Four-cross racing has dropped out of the limelight since the UCI ditched it from their World Cup series, so a British success story at this year's World Championships in Italy went largely under the radar. Luke Cryer from Stone, near Stoke-on-Trent, bagged an impressive second place in the Elite Men's final, beating established UK names like Scott Beaumont, Lewis Lacey and Duncan Ferris. Aged just 19 and with plans to turn his attention to enduro racing, he's definitely one to watch.

Luke started racing 4X aged just 15 and earned a place on the mountain biking course at Borders College in Galashiels, Scotland, so he could train and be coached to realise his potential. With a no-compromise attitude and a love of racing, his sights were soon fixed on the coveted rainbow stripes. With help from his mum and skills coach Andy Barlow, he approached the World Champs in Val di Sole feeling awesome on his bike and ready to put everything on the line, and it paid off with an awesome result.

Though he's certainly not afraid of hard work, Luke reckons it's the enjoyment he gets from riding that's one of the key factors to his success. Getting on the podium is addictive and he can't wait to get racing in 2016. His goals for the coming year are more focused towards enduro – a sport with more potential for sponsorship and avenues of progression – with hopes to compete in the World Series. He promises not to forget his 4X roots though, and hopes to get selected for the 2016 World Champs squad. Fingers crossed that here's another Brit on his way to world domination! ⚙️

Photo: Keith Valentine



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 **GIANT.**



The carbon rim may be super-stiff but Stan's reckon it soaks up vibrations too, making for a rapid set of wheels

STAN'S BRAVO WHEELS


Atherton approved carbon hoops

Ask a group of riders what rims they recommend and you're sure to hear the name Stan's pop up, and for good reason – their rims just work. The new Bravo has been developed in conjunction with that rather fast Atherton family and is a wide (26.6mm internal) carbon rim designed for all-mountain/trail/enduro riding.

Stan's have paid close attention to the rim shape and carbon lay-up

process. The result is their new 'Radial Impact Absorbing Carbon Technology' (RiACT), which is said to make the Bravo three times stiffer laterally than their aluminium rims. Stan's reckon it's faster too, thanks to the way the carbon absorbs radial impacts and vibrations.

The Bravo is available in 26in, 650b and 29in sizes. On the Pro wheels it's laced with Sapim Custom Force spokes to Stan's new Neo Ultimate hubs. These glorious little numbers

will work with just about any axle out there, including SRAM's new Predictive Steering and Boost standards. The rear hub has a six-pawl design with 72 points of contact and five degrees of engagement to help keep things sprightly. It'll also accept SRAM's XD Driver body. Our sample 650b wheels weigh an impressive 1,566g a pair. 

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01

02

03

04

05

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FEATURING



24 ONE HELLUVA YEAR
Our 2015 highlights so far



29 BIKEPEDIA
This month: XC full-sussers



36 NEW FROM YETI
We check out the SB4.5c

Sender City

*Big hucks in the desert dirt?
It's Rampage time again!*

By the time you read this the hype-train will be at full speed and a fearless crew of riders will be gathering in the Utah desert ready to huck their meat of some massive cliffs and toss in some big tricks for good measure. Yep, it's Red Bull Rampage time again. Last year's was an electric event. Andreu Lacondeguy smashed the competition with his first run, earning an unbeatable 95.25 points for his huge drops and floaty steeze — we're already stoked to see what he pulls out of the bag this year. Our very own Brendan Fairclough bagged eighth place with a superb technical line — let's hope he can do even better this time round, along with fellow Brits Sam Reynolds and Bernard Kerr. You can watch all the action live on 17 October at www.redbull.tv. 🍷



INNES GRAHAM

MS MONDRAKER TEAM DH RACER

“With any sport, there are factors that make the difference between having an incredible amount of talent and actually being the best. One of the biggest, in my opinion, is being mentally strong. The ability to block things out and execute a near perfect run with so many factors against you is something not many of us can accomplish easily.

My World Cup season finished before it had hardly even started. After a great race at home in Fort William, I broke my collarbone at the fourth round. Having had surgery before, I was confident that I knew how my body would react,

“I HAD A PLATE WITH SIX SCREWS PUT IN ON MY RIGHT COLLARBONE”

but it turned out a lot different. I had a plate with six screws put in on my right collarbone along with two other pins securing a stray fragment. The initial recovery was very fast – within two weeks I had an almost full range of movement and began riding my road bike. But it was more than eight weeks till I was given the all-clear to ride my XC bike.

If this was early or mid season I'd have pushed myself to be back at the races sooner, but because the season was nearly over it wasn't worth the risk. I want to say a massive thank you to the MS Mondraker Team for supporting me, and I can't wait to start next year with a more experienced, mature head on my shoulders.

”



IT'S BEEN A HELLUVA YEAR!

2015 has been epic, but with Red Bull Rampage kicking off and the Enduro World Series title still to be decided there's more to come. Here are our highlights so far...



1 French revolution
After a year of second places and crashes, Loic Bruni finally took his first major win, and at the DH World Champs no less! Following in the hallowed footsteps of Nico Vouilloz and Fabien Barel, he's cemented his place in MTB history. And he's just 21!

2 Rachy rules
Rachel Atherton's World Cup and World Champs double-header is a feat to remember. She consistently smashed the competition,

winning seven of the eight races.

3 Going big in Belgium
The FEST Series has been pushing the limits of freeride for two years now, and the shock-and-awe offensive continued at Nico Vink's Loosefest event in Belgium, with some of the biggest jumps and largest amounts of steeze thrown down this side of the Atlantic!

4 XC with style
Switzerland's Nino Schurter has multiple World Cup and World Champs wins to his name

but he's not your typical XC racer. In Val di Sole he styled it up over a double on his way to the series title – on a carbon XC rig with a sky high seatpost!

5 Record breaker
Greg Minnaar had a solid season and has now won more World Cups than any other male rider (with 26 wins, Rachel Atherton is still eight ahead). He put everything on the line in Val di Sole in a bid to wrest the series title from Aaron Gwin, but pushed a little bit too hard and crashed out.



A^{TO} Z

OF MOUNTAIN BIKING

L Lapierre

The roots of this brand go way back to 1946, when Gaston Lapierre set up the family-run company. Almost 70 years later they're a huge name in road and mountain biking, but still have a family-run ethos and values.

Based in Dijon, France, Lapierre's first bikes were made entirely on the premises. In 1987 Lapierre started making mountain bikes, an innovative move from such a small company. They set up their first MTB team in 1988, well ahead of the times.

In 1996 Lapierre really stepped up production and became a worldwide brand. Most of Lapierre's full-suspension bikes used a Horst Link four-bar linkage design, so they couldn't be sold in the USA until last year when Specialized's FSR suspension patent expired.

Lapierre's long-standing relationship with French DH racing legend Nico Vouilloz has helped them develop some super-fast



machines. Their electronically controlled e: Shock technology has put them at the cutting edge of MTB development.

Lapierre have fielded some incredible DH teams. Past riders include Danny

Hart, Sam Blenkinsop and Emmeline Ragot, while the current team is made up of 2014 Junior World Cup and World Champs winner Loris Vergier, 16-year-old Canadian whip king Finn Iles and newly crowned DH world champ Loic Bruni.

Data-logging equipment is regularly attached to bikes at World Cups and the whole team ride custom geometry frames with a host of built-in geometry adjustments. We look forward to the next Lapierre innovation...



SECOND COACH

HOP IT!

Learning to bunnyhop will improve your confidence on the trail – it'll help you get out of trouble, enabling you to hop over a stump or rock if you end up on the wrong line. It can be hard to see at speed, but advanced riders hop and skim over roots, rocks and ruts all of the time. Here are some tips for getting extra height when you hop.



Compress Get really low, just like you would if you were going to jump as high as you could. Getting low like a coiled spring gives you more range to hop.

Power up You need to give it 100 per cent. Put some power into your manual, then push hard through your legs to stand up and jump.

Don't pull up If you pull up, all you're doing is lifting the bike, so you're not actually getting your core mass any higher. If you push down and hop correctly, the bike will come up without you having to yank it up.

Work on technique Master the manual first, then the rear wheel lift, then bring them together with quicker timing. Manual, hop!

THE BEST OF...

THE QUANTOCKS

South West England is known for beaches and cream teas rather than mountainous terrain, but there's still plenty of fat-tired fun to be had.

Somerset's Quantock Hills form a ridgeline running from Taunton to the Bristol Channel.

With a multitude of trails dropping down either side, you could be entertained for weeks.

From the open moorland XC trails of the northern end to the gnarly DH trails of Cockercombe, the Quantocks have it covered.



THE LOCAL

Rob Newman
Enduro racer

Rob has been exploring the western counties on two wheels for most of his life. Riding for the Banshee/One Industries/MRP team, these hills form one of his main training areas. He says: "The Quantocks offer so many different types of trail that it's impossible not to enjoy yourself in these varied woods and moorlands, while improving your riding at the same time!"



ACCOMMODATION

The area has a wealth of campsites and B&Bs for you to choose from, if you want to be as close to the action as possible. Villages like Holford and Crowcombe are right in the heart of the Quantocks, mere seconds from the trails.

A great bike-friendly guesthouse is the Old Cider House in Nether Stowey (www.theoldciderhouse.co.uk). It offers secure storage, bike cleaning facilities, three pubs in walking distance and even its own microbrewery.



TRAILS

You can find all levels of riding on the Quantocks. The northern end between East Quantoxhead and Crowcombe has plenty of easy doubletrack trails criss-crossing the open moorland with awesome views out over the Bristol Channel. Dropping down from here are numerous 'combes' or valleys, each with twisting, swooping, rooty singletrack down from the ridge. The Great Wood and Triscombe areas are full of more challenging DH trails – keep an eye out for the many entries and exits.



ENTERTAINMENT

With so many trails to explore in the area, what more entertainment could you want? But if some evening entertainment is required both Taunton and the seaside town of Minehead are within a 20-minute drive and have a host of bars, pubs and clubs. Minehead even has a Butlins if that floats your boat. If you want something a little quieter then the many pubs around the Quantocks offer local ales, ciders and banter.



FOOD

Country pubs with good pub grub are the forte of the Quantocks, with many offering local produce and home cooked dishes. A favourite is the Blue Ball in Triscombe. Being just down the hill from the main DH area, it's perfect for post-ride sustenance. Another good mountain-bike-friendly pub worth a shout is the Carew Arms in Crowcombe. If you want fast food then I'm afraid it's a trip back into Taunton or Minehead.



HUSTLE HILLS, RAVAGE THE DESCENTS

For you, riding Enduro is all about the sweat equity you put in to each run. An agile and responsive beast, the **2016 GT Sanction** is ready to chew up the trails and spit you out on top.

Check out the 2016 GT Sanction lineup at GTBicycles.com
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& WORLD CUP CHAMPION



MBUK

BIKEPEDIA

XC FULL-SUSSER

Can't tell a dirt jump bike from a downhill race rig? We're here to help!

In the world of cross-country racing the hardtail used to be king, but full-suspension bikes can now be built light enough to compete with their rigid-reared cousins. Their extra grip and comfort means they're a common sight at marathon events, and they're great for trail rides on flowing terrain too.



1

Light weight

Light wheels reduce rotational weight, which is one of the best ways to improve the acceleration of a bike. Carbon wheels offer the ultimate combination of strength, stiffness and weight, but often at the expense of comfort.

2

Foam grips

The lightest grips going are little more than thin slivers of foam. Glue them onto the bar so they don't spin and they offer surprising amounts of grip. They're used by many of the top racers on the World Cup XC circuit.

3

Short travel

XC bikes offer just enough suspension to smooth things out, but not so much that your pedalling power is wasted – usually 80 to 120mm of travel front and rear. The suspension tends to be set up to feel stiff rather than plush.

4

Big wheels

These lightweight mile munchers generally use 29in wheels, because they cover ground faster than smaller hoops and roll more easily over roots and rocks. Shorter riders sometimes opt for smaller 650b wheels instead.

5

Suspension lockouts

To minimise the loss of power caused by suspension bob on climbs most XC bikes have lockouts. These can be activated via remote levers or directly by reaching down to flick a switch on the fork or shock.

XC FULL-SUS

All you need to know...

What to wear Snug-fitting Lycra bib shorts and a three-pocket jersey will keep you comfy on fast and furious blasts or during races while allowing you to store essential food and tools. For longer rides we'd go for baggies.

Where to go You can razz around trail centres or head out on long XC rides into the hills, as long as the terrain isn't too gnarly. Rolling hills like the Cotswolds or South Downs are where these bikes feel most at home.

Whom to watch Jaroslav Kulhavy is known for riding a full-suspension bike on almost any track, including at the London Olympics, where he won gold.

BEST OF BREED

Three to consider



GIANT STANCE 27.5 2

You'll struggle to find a 29er at this price, but the 650b Stance has 120mm of travel and good entry-level components.

£999 www.giant-bicycles.com



CANYON LUX CF 7.9

Canyon's buy-direct approach brings you a carbon frame and some high-end components at a mid-range price.

£2,425 www.canyon.com



WHYTE M-109 C TEAM

The UK-designed M-109 C Team weighs just 11.5kg (25lb) and has a top spec plus lifetime warrantied pivot bearings.



THANK GOD FOR...

SEALED BEARINGS

If you like your bike to run smoother than a Mr Whippy ice cream, then be thankful for sealed cartridge bearings. With your hubs, headset and bottom bracket all rotating on bearings, it's essential that they're weatherproof and easy to service and replace. In the old days this meant dealing with loose ball bearings and various other fiddly components. Hub servicing would often turn into an epic, involving tweezers and a steady hand. Modern sealed bearings come in one handy piece that just presses into place but can still be lubricated at home. When they're worn out you simply buy the correct diameter replacement, pop out the old one and drop in the new one. Top-end sealed bearings use higher quality steel or ceramic balls and better seals, and are made within tighter tolerances for a longer, smoother life. With good quality materials and sealing, they can stand up to the worst of the British weather – so long as you don't go aiming a jetwash straight at them. ●

FLASHBACK

LATE '90S 50T CHAINRINGS

WAY BACK, WHEN downhill racing mainly involved riding at crazy-high speeds down fireroads, riders used to fit huge chainrings with up to 52 teeth so they could carry on putting the power down. Keeping the chain on called for chunky metal chain guides that were usually held in place by the driveside BB cup. Bikes had seven or eight gears, which was the most available on a cassette at the time!



THAT WAS THEN THIS IS NOW!

#60 DH gearing

2015 SRAM XO1 DH

ALMOST GOING FULL circle, SRAM's XO1 DH groupset has taken downhill bikes back to seven-speed cassettes, but this time with super-close ratios and a tiny 10t top gear. Narrow/wide rings and clutch-equipped rear mechs mean the chain guide is now a safeguard rather than an essential, and ISCG mounts make it easy to bolt a lightweight carbon or plastic guide to your frame.




TRAIL TUCKER

Our favourite post-ride treats from the UK's top riding spots



#5 6oz venison burger Nevis Range, Fort William

The Nevis Range puts the mountain into mountain biking – and the food baby into your stomach! This prime and locally sourced venison burger is exclusive to mountain bikers and is topped with haggis, cheddar and bacon. A hard day on the hill requires some serious food, and this will fill that hole in no time!

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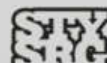


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Rider: Elliott Heap | Photo: Duncan Philpott

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CANYON



LIVING THE DREAM

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM THOSE WHO'VE SUCCESSFULLY TURNED MOUNTAIN BIKING INTO MORE THAN JUST A HOBBY

Joe Bowman & Duncan Philpott Steel City Media

You've almost certainly watched one of Joe's videos – a *This Is Peaty* episode perhaps, or one of his World Cup edits. On the same end of a different camera, Duncan has made a name for himself taking awesome riding photos. Together they've turned their passion for bikes into a full-blown career.

JB: Growing up in the hills outside of Sheffield I was always messing around on crappy hardtails, landing to flat down at the park. Then I got into DH, racing a few of the amazing Pearce Cycles series and Welsh Dragon rounds. Before SCM I worked as a sales rep for Bigstone, who used to import brands like Five Ten.

DP: Bikes came in pretty late for me, as I was just finishing up school. I drew up a list of unis close to decent riding and Sheffield came out tops. I was on the path to becoming an accountant or standing in front of a class babbling on about numbers. Photography was always in the background though – I worked in a camera shop and took pictures whenever I could.

JB: I was fortunate enough to meet Steve Peat after Five Ten started sponsoring him.

I'd been doing some edits for our old blog, *This Is Sheffield*, and Steve was looking to create something to fuel his online fans. It was all pretty last-minute, but before I knew it I was hopping on a plane with him to the first round of the World Cup in 2012, and it's been pretty nuts since then.

DP: A bit of involvement with *This Is Sheffield* put me on the MTB photo taking path. Then I was fortunate enough to be brought onboard when Joe set up Steel City Media. Working with Peaty on various little projects went a long way to building up some rep and scoring bigger jobs.

JB: Starting out in business is always tough – just getting enough work in to cover everything. Camera equipment definitely makes bikes look cheap!

DP: I started shooting while at uni, when there wasn't as much pressure to make a full-time living from it, but things picked up surprisingly quickly. Getting your name out there is a challenge, but with social media everything spreads rapidly.

JB: People know what's going on 24/7 with the industry and athletes' lives thanks to Instagram and Facebook. With that, plus Red Bull's amazing race coverage, it's going to be cool to see what kind of content viewers are looking for. Maybe edits will max out at 15 seconds by 2020?! I really miss buying the yearly Alex Rankin/Clay Porter/*New World Disorder* release though.

DP: It seems like people won't load a video on their phone if it's longer than 30

seconds. Fortunately there's always heaps of positive feedback for some of the longer content we produce.

JB: There's one big thing we're working on right now for 2017, which I know sounds way off, but it's going to be a lot of work to make it happen. I can't say much more about it now, but fingers crossed and we'll keep you updated!

DP: Who knows what's coming up next? One of the perks of the job is something can hit your inbox and the next minute you're off somewhere exciting and exotic!

Something can hit your inbox and the next minute you're off somewhere exciting and exotic!

JB: One story that stands out from our time on the race circuit is when we drove into a safari park in South Africa with Josh Lewis. We got our rental truck stuck in a ditch in the middle of nowhere and with no fuel while searching for a giraffe we'd spotted and had to get out and push, all the while being scared of getting eaten! We finally made it home safe, but we never found that giraffe...

DP: There are quite a few of these stories to be told, but I'm not sure how many can be aired! Something seems to happen at every race... 🍌



MBUK RETAIL THERAPY

Stay puffed

Feeling chilly after a long ride? Hiked your bike to the top of Ben Nevis? Or just want to look cool after slogging out some laps at your local trail centre? An insulated jacket will keep you toasty

1 HAGLOFS ESSENS II DOWN VEST

This super-lightweight down vest will keep your core warm when it's not cold enough for a full jacket or you need something more easily stowable. Filled with the finest goose feathers, it's tear resistant, windproof and has a DWR coating to shrug off light showers/drizzle. At 190g you won't even notice it's there! £150 www.haglofs.co.uk

2 VAUDE KABRU LIGHT JACKET II

Wear it as a mid-layer under your waterproof on freezing winter rides or as an outer layer while refuelling at the pub/cake shop – either way, the lightweight (285g) Kabru Light jacket ought to keep you nice and warm, with a 90 per cent duck down fill and a Pertex Quantum outer to keep the wind at bay. £150 www.vaude.com

3 BERGHAUS ASGARD HYBRID JACKET

Down jackets tend to get waterlogged in the rain – but not this one. Berghaus give their goose feathers a hydrophobic coating that ensures the Asgard Hybrid repels water for longer and dries quicker too. Add Hydroloft Elite Pro synthetic insulation and a Pertex Quantum shell, and this is one highly technical jacket. £200 www.berghaus.com

4 NORTH RIDGE HYBRID JACKET

North Ridge's UK designers know a thing or two about our long, dark winters. The Hybrid's orange shell will help you stand out in the wilds (it comes in black too) while its hydrophobic goose down stuffing keeps you warm. It packs down into its own bag too. £130 (£100 with £5 GO Outdoors discount card) www.gooutdoors.co.uk



5 ALPKIT OHIRO JACKET

Synthetic insulation makes the Ohiro (pronounced 'zero hero') a good wet weather option – it'll fend off the elements when you're out on exposed hillsides (the hood will even fit over your helmet) and you can throw it on over wet riding gear to warm yourself up. It's ready for the worst of it, and designed to be super-durable too.

£120 www.alpkit.com



Photo: Steve Behr

INDUSTRY INSIDER

NIGEL PAGE

CRC/NUKEPROOF TEAM MANAGER

Older readers may remember Nigel Page from his days as a pro downhiller. He's now the driving force behind the successful CRC/Nukeproof race team.

Biking background

I raced BMX as a kid until I was 17, then started racing mountain bikes properly in 1997. 2002 was to be my first full World Cup season but I suffered a life changing ankle injury. After that, I got more involved in working with Jeff Steber at Intense on bike ideas and designs. In 2007 I decided I really wanted to run a race team. I met Michael Cowan, who's a really good rider and passionate racer and one of the directors at Chain Reaction Cycles, and eight years on we have one of

the best downhill teams in the world.

Party time

There have been some fun times over the years, especially back in the day with Peaty, Warner, etc. I'm sure there are still a few now but it's a pretty busy week at the races and I usually have to get everyone home the day after the race.

The daily grind

A typical day can be spent doing anything from planning the next season to dealing with sponsorship, planning budgets, organising race vehicles, ordering parts, helping with bike design for Nukeproof, booking hotels and flights, signing up for races, driving the race van for hours, shopping, cooking for the whole team and

sometimes doing the odd ride or race myself, because I still love to ride.


Teamwork

I have really good riders who aren't too much hard work, so that makes my life a lot easier. All the riders on the team become your good friends and it makes you feel really proud when it all comes together and they win races.

Downtime

I enjoy being at home with my family because I travel a lot. I really like going away in our caravan and I have a new passion for racing MX enduro. My four-year-old son Harrison loves riding his bike and it's great seeing him doing this.

Up-and-coming riders

If you want to make a career out of racing your bike I'd say have fun first off, but train hard. Always be nice and polite, and be grateful to people who help you out. A lot of riders think it's just about racing and getting results, but there's a lot more than this – go above and beyond what you have to do for your sponsors to make yourself valuable. 



New for
2016

YETI SB4.5C

Think 29ers are boring? You ain't seen nothing Yeti!

Following hot on the heels of the 650b-wheeled SB5c trail bike and SB6c enduro bike comes the SB4.5c 29er. Here are five reasons to get excited about Yeti's new steed...

1



SWITCH TO INFINITY

Yeti's Switch Infinity suspension system is configured to give the SB4.5c an incredibly efficient, sports car like feel. With rear wheel travel limited to 114mm (4.5in) it isn't the most forgiving bike through the rough, but the lack of bob means fiddling with climbing modes just isn't necessary and it ascends with a sprightly feel, as well as remaining poppy and responsive when riding dynamically.

2



LIGHTEN UP

We put a medium SB4.5c on the scales and found it to weigh an impressive 11.7kg (25.8lb). Add this to the efficient suspension, and you have a bike that rewards every watt you can muster with rapid acceleration and climbing vigour. When riding high in the French Alps at the bike's launch it made some climbs feel like cheating!

3



PRECISION INSTRUMENT

Yeti claim this is one of the stiffest full-suspension frames they've ever made. They've gone for the new Boost spacing at both ends, and the extra-wide hubs mean the DT Swiss wheels feel far stiffer than such lightweight aluminium hoops ought to too. Once we'd switched to some sturdier tyres, this made for a precise and sharp-handling ride on demanding alpine terrain.

4



MODERN GEOMETRY

Many 29er frames are still stuck in the geometry dark ages but Yeti's offering is refreshingly relaxed. The XL bike we rode felt pretty roomy for our 6ft 3in tester, despite its short 55mm stem, and the 67.4-degree head angle is relatively relaxed compared to its big-wheeled rivals. Along with the supple 140mm (5.5in) fork, this allows the SB4.5c to punch well above its weight in terms of descending confidence.

5



SORTED SPEC

Yeti will be shipping just one build option to the UK, but that's no bad thing. With a wide-ranging SRAM X01 drivetrain, Fox's superb Float DPS shock and a RockShox Reverb Stealth dropper post, there's little left to be desired. The Fox Float 34 Factory fork is much improved over the CTD version of old too. Just add burlier tyres.



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I ACHE IN THE PLACES WHERE I USED TO PLAY



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★ MBUK STAR LETTER



Plans had been made – nine mates and a weekend in sunny Scotland doing two of the 7stanes. The day before, my copy of MBUK landed on the doorstep with the free tyre levers so I bunged the mag into my bag for the journey and the levers into my CamelBak. Glentress was a hoot and by the end we all had smiles that wrapped round to the back of our heads. After a night in tents during which a deluge worthy of Noah's second coming rained down on us, we woke bright and early and headed to Innerleithen. Now I'm a little (OK, a fair bit) on the porky side so the climb was hell for me, but I slogged on as best I

Some people may scoff at our cover gifts, but here's proof of just how useful they can be!



could. Eventually the crest was close and I thought to myself, "one last push". I put my back into it, only to hear something go crunch. On inspection, I found that my chainstay had snapped. "Great," I thought, "now I have a long slog back to the car park on foot." One of my mates grabbed some zipties, gaffer tape and the MBUK tyre levers, and after a few minutes' work

I had a working bike that enabled me to coast down the fireroads back to base. Thanks guys – couldn't have done it without you!

ANTHONY DIDSBURY, MANCHESTER

When eating too many pies goes wrong... It's a good thing you've got such resourceful mates, Anthony!



If your letter gets picked as the Star Letter, you'll receive a pair of DMR Vault pedals worth £99.99, courtesy of Upgrade (www.upgradebikes.co.uk). For full Mountain Biking UK terms and conditions, see p12.

Back from the dead

I spent five months in hospital this year and wasn't expected to survive. I lost 12st and 14in off my waistline in three months, and it got to the point where a nurse had to move my head because I didn't even have the strength to look at visitors. I ended up having a liver transplant at the wonderful King's College Hospital in London and surprised them by pulling through, but while recovering I contracted a virus that left me unable to use my left leg. I've worked my arse off, learning to walk again and trying to get better slowly, and today I took my box-fresh bike out and did three miles. I struggle to

With a new bike and a new liver James is raring to get back out on the trails



walk three steps normally! I'm a 42-year-old transplantee without the full use of my legs but there's no such thing as "can't". Thanks for a great mag that kept my hopes up when hope was spread VERY thin.

JAMES BATE, VIA EMAIL

We're glad you found some motivation in our pages, James – it makes all that time in the office listening to Jimmer prattle on about badgers and JCW cough up rattly phlegm seem worth it! Here's hoping you'll be out shredding the trails again soon.

Reformed roadie

I've had a road bike for a number of years and a 14-year-old son for... 14 years. We encouraged him

SOCIAL STUFF

@ MBUK FORUM

www.bikeradar.com/forums

Technique for hitting boggy mud at speed?

Manual – **ilovedirt**

Lean back and unweight the front wheel if you can't manual. This also helps in sand – **buddy_club**

Hit your front brake while moving your weight forward. As you start to launch over the bars, stretch forward into a Superman pose – **Thewaylander**

Drop down a gear or five, get out of the saddle, pedal and pray! – **mattyfez**

f FACEBOOK

www.facebook.com/MBUKMag

Would you ever ride a DH trail blind?

You never know what's around the corner, that's life! – **Chris Hutchinson**

Riding a trail flat out and blind isn't always gunna end well – **Ben Walton**

'Walk the trail first' is such nonsense when they're 20 minute runs in some places – **Gareth Richards**

TWITTER

http://twitter.com/mbukmagazine

Best biking bodge?

Fixed my exploded tyre with half a ton of gaffer tape – **@RollsyMTB**

The pin came out that holds my brake pads in. Found a lollipop stick on the floor that did the trick – **@jonny_booth**

I snapped my bar once and used gaffer tape, zip ties and one of nature's finest sticks to get me home! – **@JoeHickers**

The small print

Email your letters and photos to mbuk@bikeradar.com.

- The 'Star Photo' winner will receive a Lezyne CNC Dirt Floor Drive pump worth £89.99.
- The 'That's Gotta Hurt' winner will receive a Lezyne Port A Shop toolkit worth £99.99.
- The 'Hardcore Heroes' winner will receive an Effetto Mariposa Caffelatex Tubeless Conversion Kit worth £49.99.

Turn to p12 for full Mountain Biking UK terms and conditions.

to ride from an early age and as he got older his biking love diverged from tarmac to mountain biking and BMX racing. As a good father I took him to events and venues and berated him for not jumping higher or going faster. It finally dawned on me this year – if you can't beat them, join them. Now, after much research, I'm the owner of my own mountain bike. What an eye opener! I've discovered that I'm a total chicken, that shins don't like pedals whacked into them and that mountain biking is fun. Two inches of 'air' on a jump after patient instruction from my lad felt really good.

High-fives all round! (He's a much better teacher than me). "LOL" is a term that can be used when Dad falls off his bike and for some reason "dude" is creeping into my vocabulary!

COLIN RUDLOF, VIA EMAIL
Your son clearly knows the deal – good on him, and good on you for finally converting! Getting muddy is tons more fun than dicing with death on the roads.



Rig reading

As a dedicated reader of MBUK for well over 10 years, even when I'm tripping pipe on a drill ship in the Gulf of Mexico I'll always find a place for my magazine. It helps get me through my four weeks on board before I can get home and ride at Cannock Chase during my four weeks off. Thanks for making a hard job that little bit easier for me!

JOE ERDMAN, FUGRO SYNERGY, GULF OF MEXICO
Four weeks off? What a slacker! Oh, and can you have a word with those bods at Shell? It costs an absolute fortune to fill up the MBUK van...



Now that's a bruise! **DAMIEN MURRAY** gets bonus points for doing the pic Kim Kardashian style. We don't think he's going to break the internet, but he may well have broken his bike

WIN Lezyne tool package



Here's **MATT PARKES**, 13, styling it up at Antur Stiniog. Pic by **WAYNE SHAKELL**



"Not sure if this is even legal, but this is how we roll," says **BAZ WELSH** from Lancashire of this impressive bike-rackage, adding: "And Stiniog was epic!"



We usually prefer action shots to bike pics, but this is one hell of a photo that **JAMIE HEWITT'S** taken of his Lapierre, and on a GoPro too!



MBUK HARDCORE HERO

Here's **CHRIS OWEN** sending it off a mountain hut in Méribel, France. Pic by his mate **GREIG JONES**

WIN Effetto tubeless kit



★ MBUK STAR PHOTO



Alpine downhill trails not tough enough for you? Try them on drop bars! After a week in Morzine, **ANDY ROBSON** swapped his MTB for a road bike and hit the Zore run in Avoriaz. Pics from **EMILY TUFF**



WHAT YOU COULD WIN...

The Lezyne CNC Dirt Floor Drive track pump is made from durable CNC machined aluminium and has an oversized barrel, piston, hose and connectors to deliver twice as much air per stroke and quickly fill tyres or seat tubeless tyre systems. For more info, visit www.upgradebikes.co.uk.

! MBUK STACK IT



So you've crashed and your saddle's nearly taken out your 'nads. Do you get any sympathy from your mates? 'Course not, especially when there's a selfie to be had! Pete Coombes snapped this shot of his unfortunate mate **LEWIS CURRELL** at Queen Elizabeth Country Park in Hampshire.



Talk about starting young! Here's five-year-old **ZACH TAYLOR** hitting a jump in Morzine. His dad Stuart says: "He's hooked and now wants to earn a Red Bull helmet. Watch out Rampage!"



"It was costing me a fortune to save weight on my bike – carbon everything," says **NEIL DUERDEN** from Lancashire. "Then I had a brainwave to lose crucial grams. Worked a treat, and everyone around me sped up too!"



"If you ain't hiking, you ain't mountain biking," reckons **GRANT PARKER**, after an awesome day scaling the Gatesgarth and Nan Bield passes in the Lakes with his mates

TWEETS OF THE MONTH



Absolutely gutted for my big bro **@dan_atherton**, the creator of Hardline. He's getting surgery on his shoulder today. The jump got made smaller! Heal fast, bro. Won't be the same without Affy racing it! – **Rachel**

Atherton's big brother hasn't had much luck with injuries, but thanks to his hard work Red Bull Hardline was epic!



What the hell... back to school today! So hard, from one world to another

– It's not easy being a 21-year-old world champ! Less than a week after his victory in Andorra, **Loic Bruni** had to swap his rainbow stripes for pinstripe trousers (perhaps) as he headed off to business school

A bit of commitment from this fan. Good work



mate – Idolising **Steve Peat** is one thing, having his 2009 World

Champs victory permanently etched on your body takes hero worship to a whole new level!



Sweat, dust, mud & tired legs! #thesweatlife

– here's **Hannah Barnes** showing the telltale

signs of a good ride. Looks like she doesn't get to enjoy one of the **MBUK** crew's guilty pleasures though – picking at the clumps of mud hanging off our leg hairs!



INSTAGRAM

<http://instagram.com/mbukmagazine>



The only thing sweeter than that view is **@chr15's** Ti Kingdom Hex



We love **@gartanz's** matching father and son's Specialized S-Works



**POINT THE DUNE DOWN A ROUGH TRAIL AND
THE BUILD-UP OF SPEED IS SUCH THAT IT
FEELS LIKE YOU'RE SAT ATOP AN AVALANCHE**

FirstRides ^{MBUK}

FEATURING: Mondraker Dune Carbon XR // Corsair Toro // Scott Voltage FR 710



The new carbon frame ups stiffness and shaves off plenty of weight



Fox's new Float X2 shock sits at the heart of a great suspension system

MONDRAKER DUNE CARBON XR

FRAME Carbon fibre, 160mm (6.3in) travel **FORK** Fox 36 Float FIT RC2 Factory, 170mm (6.7in) travel **SHOCK** Fox Float X2 Factory **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM X01/X1 (1X11) **WHEELSET** Mavic Crossmax XL Pro Ltd wheels, Mavic Crossmax Charge XL Ltd (F) and Crossmax Quest XL Ltd (R) 27.5x2.4in tyres **BRAKES** SRAM Guide RSC **BAR/STEM** ONOFF Stoic Carbon, 780mm/ONOFF Stoic FG, 30mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** RockShox Reverb Stealth/SDG Circuit MTN **WEIGHT** 12.75kg (28.11lb), medium size without pedals **PRICE** £6,599 (complete bike) **CONTACT** Silverfish UK www.silverfish-uk.com

Mondraker's top enduro bike costs a whole lot of cash, but the great geometry and all-new carbon frame paired with top-notch Fox shocks mean it has the performance to match.

The frame

The lightweight but super-stiff full-carbon frame is a minor work of art that incorporates Mondraker's extra-long Forward Geometry concept. New, beefier bearings and collet fixtures hold everything in place for a stiff and direct rear end. The 160mm (6.3in) of rear travel is controlled by Mondraker's Zero multi-link system, which compresses the shock from both ends for progressive control. The frame is single-ring only, allowing for tight 430mm chainstays (extendable to 440mm). Press-in cups let you alter the head angle by one degree either side of the base 66 degrees.

The kit

The SRAM drivetrain is a mix of X1 and X01, not range-topping XX1, but functionally it's identical and it's close in weight too. The Mavic Crossmax XL Pro Ltd

wheelset is a proven tubeless ready set-up with spades of stiffness, though the rims aren't overly wide at 23mm internally. The front Charge tyre has acres of grip but the semi-slick Quest rear is twitchy on the limit.

The own-brand 35mm carbon bar feels a bit harsh, though it's plenty wide at 780mm. Some testers found the SDG saddle rather uncomfortable too, and we'd fit bigger rotors to the SRAM Guide RSC brakes for big-mountain use.

The spec highlight has to be the sublime Float X2 rear shock, with high- and low-speed compression and rebound damping adjustment, and new stiction-reducing EVOL sleeve. Up front there's a 170mm (6.7in) Fox 36 Float RC2 fork.

The ride

Point the Dune down a rough alpine trail and the build-up of speed is such that it feels like you're sat atop an avalanche. Part of that is down to the superb suspension. The Fox 36 is one of our favourite hard-hitting forks but the combination of great rear suspension kinematics and the

new X2 shock makes it feel almost harsh in comparison. The effortless disposal of anything you point it down constantly urges you to go faster while the long and slack geometry ensures it stays stable and locked on line at speeds that would have you reaching for the brakes on lesser bikes.

That said, the Dune's not all about flat-out madness. On less chaotic trails it's both ruthlessly efficient and charmingly playful, with the stable geometry not dulling the fun. The balanced suspension, roomy cockpit and respectable 12.75kg (28.11lb) mass mean it's a pleasure uphill too, with little bob despite the lack of a climb switch on the shock. A bike that costs this much should be mind-blowingly good – the real surprise is that the Dune Carbon XR actually exceeds that expectation. **JON**

FirstRides ^{RATED}

One of the best performing, flat-out fast enduro machines out there, but you'll need deep pockets



FirstRides Ratings

WE BASE OUR SCORES ON VALUE FOR MONEY AND PERFORMANCE



EXCEPTIONAL:
A genuine class leader



VERY GOOD: One of the best you can buy



GOOD: It'll do the job and do it well



BELOW AVERAGE:
Flawed in some way



POOR: Simply put, don't bother!



↑ The Toro works well at the jumps, but it's just as at home on a 4X track

↓ Its chunky aluminium frame is built to take some serious punishment



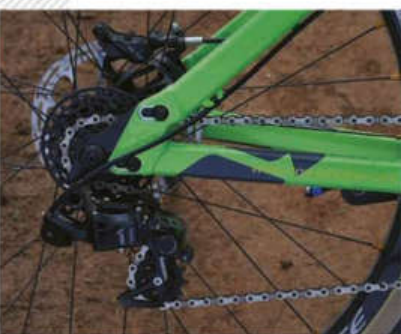
CORSAIR TORO CUSTOM BUILD

FRAME Aluminium **FORK** RockShox Pike DJ, 100mm (3.9in) travel **SHOCK** N/A **DRIVETRAIN** SRAM XO DH with Race Face Evolve cranks (1x7) **WHEELSET** Atomlab Pimplite wheels, DMR SuperMoto 26x2.2in tyres **BRAKES** SRAM Guide R **BAR/STEM** Atomlab Pimplite, 750mm/Atomlab SL, 35mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** Atomlab Pivotal/Atomlab Pivotal **WEIGHT** 12.18kg (26.87lb) with pedals **PRICE** £499.99 (frame only) **CONTACT** Resurrection Cycles www.resurrectioncycles.co.uk

Corsair Bikes have been sailing under the radar for the past couple of years, but with a new UK distributor at the helm they're ready to make a comeback. The Toro is their 4X/jump bike and we were keen to see how it handled out on the trails.

The frame

The burly aluminium frame with



↑ The seven-speed DH gearing on our custom build hints at the Toro's versatility

its tapered head tube and CNC-machined seatstay yoke and bottom bracket area tells you that this bike is built to withstand some big hits and hefty landings. The seatstay junction also houses a tidy integrated seat clamp that, unlike some we've tested, actually works really well.

Sliding bolt-on dropouts hold the 135x12mm axle and mech hanger. An integrated chaintug to keep a singlespeed set-up under tension would have been a nice touch here. ISCG tabs suggest that Corsair have 4X racing and general razzing in mind for the Toro rather than it being an out-and-out dirt jumper, and this is backed up by the frame's racy stance and relatively low bottom bracket (305mm).

The kit

Our test bike came direct from Corsair's new importers

Resurrection Cycles decked out in top-end SRAM XO DH kit – the seven-speed system is ideal for a bike like this. Matched with Race Face Evolve cranks, a RockShox Pike DJ fork and SRAM Guide R brakes, we had no problems sending jumps at full speed from the get-go. Also making an appearance on our Toro were an Atomlab Pimplite bar and wheels. The rear hub packs 120 pick-up points, so there was never a problem getting those bitch-crankers in!

The ride

The Toro feels far more like a 4X racer than a dirt or slopestyle machine, especially when specced with gears and a front brake. The low bottom bracket meant the cockpit felt really high with the original 3in-rise dirt jump bar fitted, so we swapped it for a lower-rise Atomlab DHR cut down to

760mm, which put us in a much more familiar-feeling riding position. The relatively long geometry fires you in and out of corners and feels nice and stable, unlike some of the more BMX-inspired jump bikes we're seeing a lot of these days. The Corsair just wants to go fast, everywhere!

Hitting all of our favourite street spots we felt right at home on the Toro, and it was the same story at the local pump tracks. Racer whips, squashing jumps and manoulling through quad rollers was the order of the day and it's the closest we've come to completing the reverse pump track challenge yet!

Our local DH spot is fairly suited to an aggressive hardtail – if you like a challenge – and the Toro lapped it up, leaving us grinning from ear to ear as we razzed down the trails, perhaps slower than others, but having way more fun! **JONNY**



FirstRides

Boutique 4X razzing machine for going fast everywhere. Ideal for summer evenings at the local hill





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↑ Scott's IDS-X dropout system lets you adjust the length of the chainstays

↓ Fox's latest 36 fork does a sterling job up front on the Voltage FR



SCOTT VOLTAGE FR 710

FRAME 6061 aluminium, 170-190mm (6.7-7.5in) travel **FORK** Fox 36 Float FIT RC2, 180mm (7.1in) travel **SHOCK** Fox DHX RC4 **DRIVETRAIN** Truvativ Descendant cranks, SRAM X9 rear mech and X7 shifter, e*thirteen LG1+ chain guide **WHEELSET** Syncros MD25 rims on Formula hubs, Schwalbe Magic Mary Super Gravity EVO VertStar 27.5x2.35in tyres **BRAKES** Shimano Deore XT **BAR/STEM** Syncros FR1.5, 780mm/Syncros XM1.5, 50mm **SEATPOST/SADDLE** Syncros FR2.0/Syncros XM2.0 **WEIGHT** 16.45kg (36.27lb), small size with pedals **PRICE** £3,199 (complete bike) **CONTACT** Scott Sports www.scott-sports.com

Scott's Voltage FR straddles that somewhat awkward middle ground between full-on downhill rig and long-travel trail bike, but where does it differ exactly and what type of rider does it suit?

The frame

Just like its longer-travel brother, the Gambler DH bike, the Voltage FR is highly adjustable – Scott wanted to make it as

versatile as possible. This burly little beast will accept a single or dual-crown fork, and angled headset cups (provided) can be used to adjust the head angle between 62 and 66 degrees. Rear travel can be extended from 170 to 190mm in a matter of minutes via a flippable shock mount, and chainstay length can be switched from the standard 425mm to a stumpy 410mm (though this shorter setting can only be used with 26in wheels, not the 650b hoops the complete bike comes with). To help keep things stiff at the rear, the Voltage FR uses a chunky one-piece link to drive the shock.

The kit

The 710's build definitely leans towards a bit of rough and tumble, and it'll survive a battering – though that does mean it's not exactly light. Fox suspension units at both ends do a great job of taming just

about any trail you attempt to tackle, while XT brakes offer dependable, controllable power with every lever squeeze. The Super Gravity casing, VertStar compound Schwalbe Magic Marys are surefooted on every surface we've tried them on too.

The ride

It's clear from the outset that the Voltage FR is here to be hammered. Though we're in the realms of full-on downhill bike weight, it pedals relatively well and will – if you have the strength and patience – winch its way up fireroad climbs if you miss the uplift. But it's when you start working with, rather than against, gravity that the Scott comes into its own.

It may not be the monster of a bike that the Gambler is, but at no point did we feel like we were out of our depth aboard the 710. Thump it into rocks, drops or root-riddled holes and

you'll come out the other side laughing. The Fox 36 up front sucks up the hits with control and composure, while the progressive and predictable rear end tracks the terrain impressively and boosts confidence as the trail gets uglier. Though the tyres are pretty hefty we had no issues with punctures and they simply claw their treads into just about everything they touch.

The Voltage's more flickable, bike-park-friendly nature compared to the Gambler and its reasonably low BB height (340mm in the shorter travel setting) make it a lot of fun on mellower trails too. Hit the jumps and things remain stable and easy to anticipate, and, should you misjudge things a little, the Voltage won't shy away from blatting into a flat landing. In short then, this is a great little downhill bike but a slightly lighter build would unleash even more of its potential. **ROB**

FirstRides **RATED**

We're big fans of the aggressive geometry and predictable suspension, but a lighter build would add versatility



↑ With up to 190mm out back, the Voltage FR is approaching DH bike levels of travel



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ORANGE ALPINE 160 RS

SOMETIMES IT'S BEST to keep things simple, and that's one reason – among numerous others – why we're big fans of Orange. The latest incarnation of the Alpine 160 continues to use their tried and tested, low maintenance single-pivot design, which delivers 160mm (6.3in) of rear travel. The lengthy 446mm reach and 1,212mm wheelbase (medium size) combined with the slack 65-degree head angle mean the Alpine should be a force to be reckoned with when it comes to the descents. There's plenty of space in the cockpit too, with the effective top tube measuring in at 620mm. The RS build seen here comes with a top-end RockShox Pike RCT3 fork and Monarch Plus DebonAir shock, a Race Face Turbine crankset and SRAM's new GX 1x11 transmission. We'll have a full review coming very soon.

£3,900 Orange www.orangebikes.co.uk

TOMTOM BANDIT CAMERA

THOSE WHO'VE BEEN paying close attention to the Downhill World Cup scene may well have spotted a certain former world champ sporting a new camera on his helmet this season. While the rest of us are unlikely to capture quite the same footage as Danny Hart, we can at least use the same camera. TomTom's new Bandit really packs in the features, including wi-fi and Bluetooth Smart connectivity, a decent claimed battery life, 4K video, 16MP single or multiple still images, and the option to shoot time lapse and slow motion footage. There's also a remote sold separately, along with plenty of mounting options.

£299.99 TomTom www.tomtom.com



RENTHAL INTEGRA STEM

RENTHAL DECIDED TO overhaul their direct-mount downhill stem off the back of World Cup and consumer feedback. Finding that few people used the reach adjustment on the original Integra, they've scrapped it, delivering us a choice of two fixed lengths – 45 or 50mm – instead. Each of these will be available with a zero or 10mm rise, depending on preference. You still get the same wide 64mm bar clamp for secure and stiff steering, and if you're worried about weight, our sample 45mm, zero rise option tips the scales at just 128g.

£99.99 Ison Distribution
www.ison-distribution.com



SLYTECH KNEEPRO XT KEVLAR KNEE PADS

EVER WONDERED HOW the legendary Kelly McGarry manages to walk away from some of the most savage crashes ever? Yeah, us too. Aside from his cat-like reactions, when it does go wrong, Kelly relies on Slytech armour to protect him. We've just received the Kneepro XT Kevlar pads, which use a sizeable slab of Slytech's 2nd Skin XT foam to protect the knee. In addition to a pre-shaped knee cup, the Kneepros also have a decent amount of padding on either side of the knee, a two-strap closure and perforated panels to help prevent overheating.

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LIGHT & MOTION



EASTON HEIST WHEELS

THERE ARE SOME clear benefits to be had from using wider rims, so it's cool to see Easton's new Heist wheels offering us exactly that, and at a reasonable price too. The Heist rims actually come in three different internal widths – 24, 27 and 30mm – and 650b or 29in sizes. The X5 hubs – which can be easily converted to QR or 15x100mm axles up front, and QR or 12x142mm at the rear – are laced to the rim using double-butt spokes in a three-cross pattern. The Heists are currently only available in aluminium. Stay tuned for a review in the near future.

£449.98 (with XD Driver body) Silverfish UK
www.silverfish-uk.com

Photo: © Laurence Crossman-Emms

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MBUK**#60 Anneke Beerten's Specialized S-Works Enduro 29**

WHY IS THIS A SUPERBIKE?

- Specialized have managed to package 29in wheels into a frame that still has short chainstays for lively handling and a low-ish, corner carving bottom bracket height
- The rollover advantage of the big wheels coupled with 160mm of front and 155mm of rear wheel travel means it takes some seriously ugly terrain for the Enduro 29 to get out of its depth
- Anneke uses the latest big-hitting fork from RockShox. With its Solo Air spring and stiffened chassis, the new Lyrik is supple yet supportive, and offers precise steering in the rough

Balancing act

Mixing big wheels with big travel is no easy feat, but Spesh have pulled it off

Creating a bike that can handle the roughest downhills with ease but doesn't hold you back on the climbs is a monumental task for even the most experienced bike designers. There's a multitude of factors to take into consideration, from durability, stiffness and weight to geometry. Add 29in wheels and long-travel suspension to the mix and

things become even more complicated. Yet Specialized have pulled off this delicate balancing act with the Enduro 29, creating one of the fastest trail bikes out there.

Packaging big wheels into a long-travel frame was never going to be easy, so why did Spesh attempt it? "They simply roll over obstacles with less resistance," says Jason Chamberlain, the Specialized engineer

who's worked on every Enduro model since 2002. "Bigger wheels are smoother and hold momentum better in the rough. They add control and traction, and smooth out the trail."

What about the unique 29er ride feel? It's put off riders in the past, so why does three-time 4X world champ and Enduro World Series (EWS) podium contender »



WHO IS ANNEKE BEERTEN?

In Whistler this year Anneke was crowned Queen of Crankworx, a title earned through top results and consistency, which more or less sums up her career. With multiple 4X World Championship wins, World Cup overall titles and World Cup victories to her name, Beerten is currently a top contender on the EWS circuit, regularly visiting the podium.

SWAT KIT

Specialized's SWAT system enables Anneke to carry all the essentials for on-trail repair jobs. A multi-tool is bolted to the base of the bottle cage and Specialized have managed to integrate a chain tool into the stem top cap. Neat, eh?!

TOUGH RUBBER

Lighter tyres may improve efficiency but when tackling rough and rocky trails they can easily lead to a race-ruining flat tyre. Anneke uses Specialized's tougher Grid casing to help avoid flats.

KEEP IT SECURE

Anneke uses Specialized's small upper chain guide to ensure her chain stays put when the trail gets really rough. Even with the security of SRAM's X-SYNC narrow/wide chainring you never can be too careful when it comes to racing.

COMFY HANDS

Long EWS stages mean Beerten's hands are in for a pummelling. Anneke opts to use Lizard Skins' DSP (DuraSoft Polymer) grips, which aren't only super-light but also help to cushion her palms against constant vibration.

BIG HITTER

RockShox unveiled their revised Lyrik this summer. Travel ranges from 160 to 180mm (6.3-7.1in) and Anneke uses the 160mm 29er version on her Enduro. The reworked Solo Air spring offers more sensitivity, while the beefed up lower legs and Torque caps ensure stiffness and steering precision.

ULTIMATE STOPPING

Long descents don't do brakes any favours. Luckily SRAM are one of Anneke's main sponsors and they've just released the latest iteration of their Guide brake, the Ultimate. The tweaked calliper design means the brake deals with heat build-up well and delivers predictable and dependable power even on long, brake dragging descents.

Anneke Beerten use this bike instead of the newer 650b Enduro? "The 29er is just a machine!" she says. "When I ride this bike I have the feeling that I can charge hard over technical stuff and it feels very stable." Is it quicker though? Anneke continues: "The timing was showing that I was consistently faster on the 29er versus the 650b."

Problem solving

The S-Works bike's FACT IS-X 11m carbon frame delivers 155mm (6.1in) of rear wheel travel via Specialized's four-bar linkage FSR design, so squeezing the big wheels in without upsetting the handling was never going to be straightforward. But getting it right was essential if the Enduro 29er was to handle the tight and technical terrain likely to crop up in timed EWS stages.

"Specialized are known for low bottom brackets and short chainstays. Both of those goals make it tough to squeeze that big rear wheel in, all the while keeping the seatpost position in check," says Chamberlain. How did they get around this? "The biggest obstacle was the front derailleur. We had to invent a new attachment method in order to use the derailleur that had the lowest profile shifting mechanism at the time (remember that the newest Shimano mech that pulls from the front didn't exist yet). Internally we called it the 'Taco Blade' and it works really well. We also had to get creative with the seatstay bridge." The end result is a big-wheeled machine that sports stumpy 430mm chainstays and a 351mm bottom bracket height, which is pretty impressive considering the amount of travel on tap.

Racing pedigree

Professional racers are a demanding bunch, and rightly so. With stage-winning margins often being less than a second, riders are looking for every possible advantage from their machines. "The bike has to climb like a cross-country bike, descend like a downhill bike and be light, and personally, I like a bike with a short rear end," says Anneke. But is creating a race-ready enduro machine that needs to tick a variety of boxes harder than designing a bike that's designed to do just one thing, such as a downhill bike? "I find both equally challenging in different ways," says Chamberlain. "The Enduro has to be light, plush and have a wide range of gears. The Demo (Specialized's DH bike) just has to be fast. Each customer expects their bike to be the best at what it does so we take each one to the design limits." With a string of EWS podiums under her belt, there's no doubt Anneke is grateful for all the hard work that's gone into the Enduro 29. 

THE ESSENTIALS

PRICE: £6,000

CONTACT: Specialized www.specialized.com

ALSO LOOK AT: BMC Trailfox 01 XX1, £5599 www.evanscycles.com

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Welcome to the trail. It's you versus the mountain.
Always challenge your limits. Each pedal stroke, every
breath, brings you closer to your goal. Redefine your best.

Make it personal with Madison Clothing.

**PERSONAL
GAINS**



MADISON



**FLUX SUPER LIGHT
SOFTSHELL JACKET**

Waterproof, breathable,
fitted hood and stretch fabric





TIME TRAVELLERS

Pedalling through a wild landscape unchanged for centuries, Dan Milner gets a new perspective on time itself



We've been on the trail for seven hours by the time we limp into camp – a circle of dusty earth in the village of Ambiko. It's been a tough day of rocky descents and hike-a-bike climbs, and as I smear sweat across my brow with the back of a filthy glove, all I want is a cold beer to help sluice this sensory overload into my memory bank.

Right on cue a man steps from a wall of onlookers, armed with a crate of chilled beer. We clean him out and ask for a resupply at 6.30pm, in time for dinner. He looks at me quizzically. My watch says 4.30pm but his reads 10.30. Time adopts different rules here, it seems. In rural Ethiopia, where proximity to the Equator means day and night are equal in length, one o'clock signifies the first hour of daylight and 12 o'clock

the last, whatever Greenwich or the rest of the world thinks.

We're only into our second day in the Simien Mountains and our beer vendor's logic seems alien to us. Physically we've been thrown in at the deep end, facing lung-punching climbs right out of the gate, but mentally we're still immersed in the western world, an existence defined by numbers and dictated by clocks. Today we've covered 25km, climbed 1,344m and descended 500 more. By the time we finish our traverse of this wild, rugged mountain chain, such numbers will be irrelevant, lost in a swirl of physical accomplishments and mental rewards that'll bring a shift in our priorities and our concept of time.

Goodbye Geldof

Mention Ethiopia and most people will think of famine, but the desperation of Bob Geldof's

1980s Live Aid era is long gone, replaced by a booming economy served by the fastest growing airline in Africa, Ethiopian Airlines. The capital city, Addis Ababa, welcomes us with a hectic mix of old and new. We swill down traditional dishes with glasses of microbrew beer. Around us new-build office blocks overshadow centuries old Orthodox Christian churches.

Change is reaching rural Ethiopia too, where ecologically diverse national parks are seen as vital to encouraging tourism. It's the Simien National Park, with its UNESCO status and cliff-dwelling apes of Attenborough fame, that's lured our international group, with promises of ancient mule paths to ride that have clung impossibly to vertical hillsides since the Sixth Century.

Our starting point is the 3,667m-high campground of





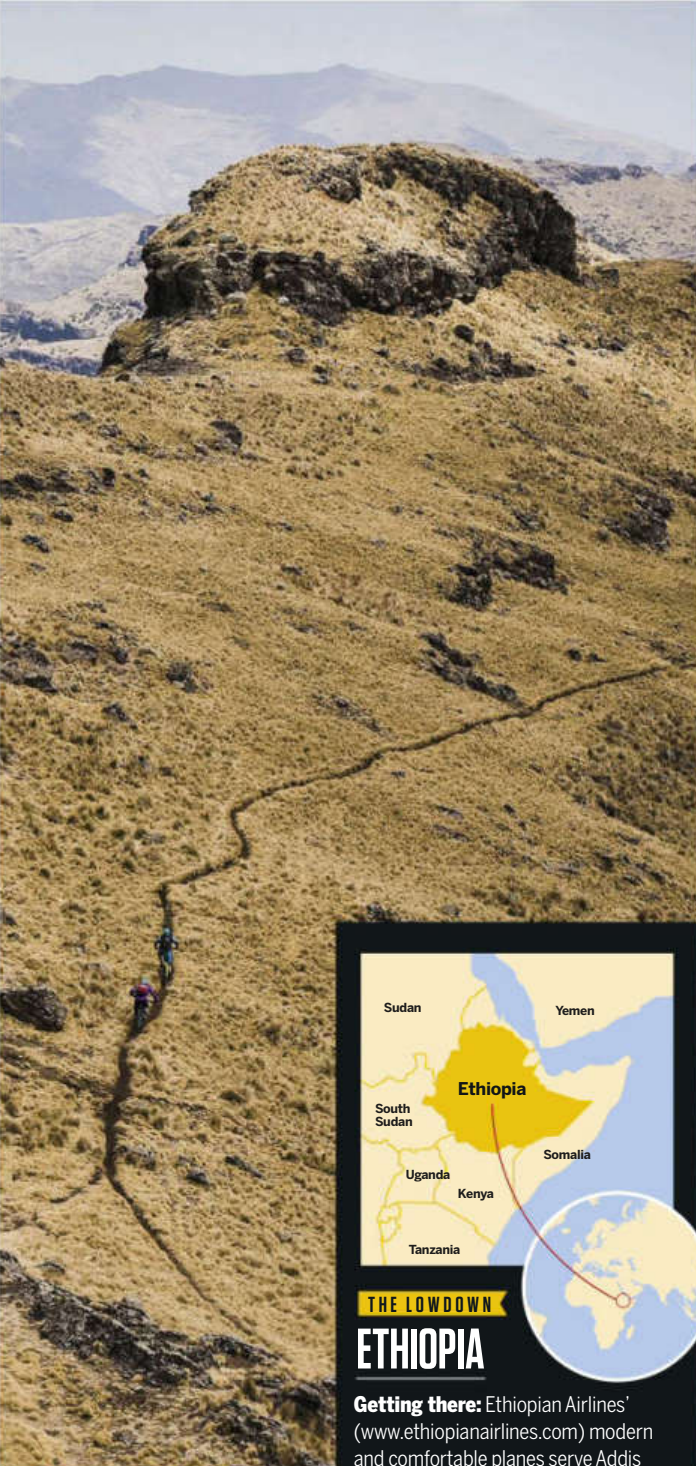
THE REWARD FOR OUR
EFFORTS IS A VIEW FROM THE
EDGE OF A VAST RIFT VALLEY



Just because it's an
expedition doesn't
mean you can't
smash some turns!



Make a mistake
here and you can
say goodbye to
your bike...



THE LOWDOWN

ETHIOPIA

Getting there: Ethiopian Airlines' (www.ethiopianairlines.com) modern and comfortable planes serve Addis Ababa daily from 83 European and US cities. Flights start at £566 return and taking your bike as excess baggage costs €80 in each direction.

How and when: Traversing the Simien Mountains is a tough challenge that requires fitness and a sense of adventure. The riding is tough but the rewards are plentiful. The expedition is offered every year by Secret Compass (www.secretcompass.com) between October and March. Temperatures can reach 30°C in the daytime but drop to 0°C at night at the high campgrounds.

Aynameda, 20km inside the park. Reaching it means an hour's flight on a twin-prop' plane to Gondar and a bumpy five-hour bus ride. Alongside pro riders Sarah Leishman and Kamil Tatarkovic, filmer Devin



Schmitt, travel journalist Aaron Gulley and Giro marketing guy Dain Zaffke, I unpack my bike and pitch my tent on a plateau carpeted in golden grass. Our actions are played out under the watchful gaze of two-dozen villagers. For the next eight days we'll rarely escape unsolicited attention, even in the most locations. "On the upside," says Tom Bodkin, our guide, "we'll never be far from a beer either."

This 110km traverse of the Simien Mountains is Tom's brainchild. He likes to give each trip an objective, reasoning that having a goal changes a mere ride into an expedition. Ours is to ride to and summit Ras Dejen, Ethiopia's highest peak at 4,533m. As we pull on down jackets and huddle in the group tent, Tom gives an enthusiastic explanation of what lies ahead. When he uses the term 'sporty' to describe one spiralling 1,000m drop down a rocky cliff face, I begin to read between the lines, and decide that to merely leave Ethiopia unscathed will tick my expedition box, whether we summit Ras Dejen or not.

Edge of the world

Our eight-day ride begins the next morning as we head straight into a 400m climb up a meandering trail that seems to have been drawn on the map by a spider with attention deficit disorder. We pedal to and fro across a wild open mountainside before the thin air forces me to dismount long before the 4,053m high point of the day. The reward for our efforts is a view from the edge of a vast rift valley.

With a 1,500m drop in front of me, it's as close as I've ever felt to standing on the edge of the world, and I recoil from the

exposure. Above my head noisy thick-billed ravens soar on thermal uplifts and behind me local kids kick a ball about as effortlessly as if playing on the beach at sea level. The ball is tethered to a stick in the ground, like a homemade version of Swingball. Necessity – or in this case, annoyance at losing too many footballs in the abyss – is the mother of invention. I can pick out the trail ahead, winding its way between spiky lobelia trees and troops of geleda baboons before disappearing into a 550m descent towards tonight's campground.

Riding here is an onslaught on the senses. The trails demand focus, and the scenery, wildlife and villagers compete for whatever attention you have left over. For eight days we experience a constantly changing landscape, from towering volcanic pinnacles to vast, plunging gorges, and ride through scenes that could have been playing out 1,000 years ago. Locals plough fields with oxen and kids spill from thatched mud houses to give chase or sell bottles of soda. We camp on dusty 'village greens', in schoolyards or perched high on cliff edges, and every night our cook, named Tadla but nicknamed 'Ramsay', serves up a feast of local and western dishes. When we ask about tasting local 'honey wine', a plastic bottle of this sweet fermented liquor appears the next evening. Getch, our local guide and fixer, is nothing if not resourceful.

High and dry

Our daily distances are short – less than 20km per day – but the rock-strewn trails and the fact we're riding higher than



Europe's highest ski lift mean we won't set any Strava King of the Mountain records this week. Riding, pushing and carrying becomes the pattern to every day as we negotiate our way through myriad challenges and obstacles. Bushes armed with thorns like 4in nails snag at our jerseys and the afternoon sun beats down with a vengeance. Our progress is humbling, something that's driven home by our 11-person support team of local guide, national park scouts and mule handlers, who are tackling the route on foot. They arrive at each camp before us to have tea brewed and plates of dry chickpeas laid out by the time we stagger in.

Ancient paths weave through patchwork fields and between villages to provide us with a constantly evolving trail as varied as the landscape we're riding through. Technical rock gardens yield to buff singletrack and hike-a-bike climbs plateau out onto lung-friendly traverses. Only twice do we get the chance to wash in rivers deep enough for full-body submersion. The second comes at the end of the 'sporty' vertical kilometre downhill Tom has warned us about. As we immerse ourselves in the cool water the frustration of the largely unridable descent ebbs away with the suds of the laundry a local is doing on a rock nearby. We've hit the country at the height of the dry season. "Come in November and you'll see a different Ethiopia," says Getch, painting a picture of verdant fields and fast-flowing rivers. Looking at the dust that cakes my bike and shoes, I find it hard to imagine.

We get a jump on the heat for our summit attempt on Ras

Dejen, riding and pushing our bikes up a steep jeep track out of Ambiko with the sun still tucked behind the horizon. We granny-ring two-thirds of the 1,400m climb before peeling off onto a rocky singletrack trail that winds its way up to the base of the mountain's final thrust upwards. From here we manhandle our bikes up to the 4,533m summit, passing them over boulders that would earn any Cub Scout their rock climbing badge.

High point

From Ethiopia's highest point we peer across what seems like half of Africa, toasting our success with soda bought from a couple of crate-carrying kids waiting at the top, our smiles mirrored by Getch and our two scouts, Sewnet and Molla. Everywhere we go in Ethiopia I detect an immense sense of pride in their country, and we're welcomed warmly. Helping foreigners haul bikes up their highest peak just seems part of that pride.

After climbing down from the summit we remount our bikes for a wild ride back to camp down steep, loose footpaths between lobelia trees. At the first pass we regroup amid a sea of inquisitive faces. A shepherd sits in hand-sewn clothes, long stick in hand, traditional music blaring out from a radio hanging around his neck that has a SIM card inserted into its top. I'm struck by the contrast, of the SIM card's existence in a landscape where electricity is scarce and daily life has gone on largely unchanged for centuries.

Far below us sits the village we'll overnight in, and beyond that another five days of riding. By the time we pedal into our end point, Addi Arkay, we'll



have climbed more than 6,000m and descended more than 8,000m. By then our own lives will have become simplified, dictated only by the need to rise at dawn and ride, push and carry bikes all day to reach our next camp by sundown. Immersed in an existence far from the traffic, timetables, meetings and deadlines that dictate our normal lives, we begin to understand the logic of aligning your clock to sunrise and sunset, the two daily constants that provide a reference to everyone in your village and the next alike. Here in the cradle of mankind our eight-day visit is a mere nanosecond in time, but it's all we need to appreciate the way the beer seller sets his watch. ☉

Ever get the feeling you're being watched?





**WE REMOUNT FOR A WILD RIDE
BACK TO CAMP DOWN STEEP, LOOSE
PATHS BETWEEN LOBELIA TREES**

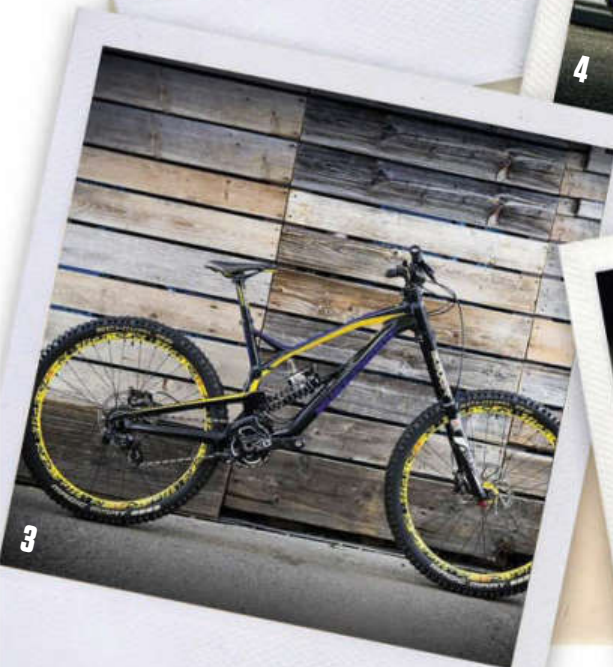


The sun may be
merciless but it
doesn't half make for
some pretty pictures

NEXT YEAR'S KIT NOW

Though 2015 is far from over, 2016 bikes and gear are already hitting the shops, and it's promising to be a great year for mountain biking

Words Rob Weaver **Pics** Dan Milner



BIKES

More choice than ever before

1. DMR Trailstar

Arguably the hardtail to own when it was launched in the mid '90s, it's great to see DMR resurrecting their classic Trailstar frame and giving it a modern day trail twist. They've designed the new chassis around 650b wheels but have ensured that it's able to accept 2.8in tyres should you want to go wide with your ride. The head angle is now a trail-slaying 66 degrees (with a 150mm fork in place), chainstay length is 425mm and the medium frame offers a lengthy 614mm effective top tube.

£499.99 www.upgradebikes.co.uk

2. Lapierre Spicy Team e:i

Although the Spicy doesn't look drastically different for next year, Lapierre have made some subtle yet significant changes to their fully fledged enduro racing beast. Pivot placement has been tweaked slightly and travel increased to 165mm (6.5in), while each size gets a longer reach (it's been bumped up by 20mm on the large frame) and a shorter seat tube. There's also an extra 10mm of tyre clearance and more room for a water bottle.

£5,500 www.hotlines-uk.com

3. Nukeproof Pulse Team

The main criticism of the original Pulse downhill bike was its weight. Nukeproof were well aware of this and have managed to shave a massive 2.5kg from the frame alone. Claimed weight for the Pulse Team is now in the region of 16.3kg (36lb). It's slacker up front, with a 62-degree head angle, and longer too, with a 1,232mm wheelbase and 440mm chainstays on the medium frame. The bottom bracket is lower and the reach has grown too.

£5,000 www.hotlines-uk.com

4. Yeti SB6c

30th Anniversary Edition

The SB6c isn't new but does sport some small changes for 2016, along with a retro yellow and turquoise paint job on the 30th anniversary model. These include internally routed cables and a move to wider 148x12mm rear axle spacing. If you do plump for the rather spendy special edition, you get a custom turquoise Fox 36 fork plus SRAM's X01 11-speed transmission and Guide RSC brakes.

£6,999 www.silverfish-uk.com

5. Brendan Fairclough's Scott Gambler Rampage Edition

Brendan has a real love/hate relationship with Red Bull Rampage. On the one hand, he fears for his life every time he drops in. On the other, he gets to throw a leg over this seriously good looking custom Gambler. While 'Brendog' won't be allowed to ride this Fox Float X2 shock equipped beast until Rampage, the camo inspired finish has been drawing the crowds wherever it's displayed. It's unlikely we'll ever see this paint job make production so you'll just have to make do with pictures.

£TBC www.scott-sports.com

6. GT Zaskar Carbon Pro

Over the past 25 years the Zaskar has enjoyed its fair share of success and has been at the forefront of some pretty massive changes to the sport along the way. The new carbon and alloy frames house 650b wheels and feature what GT term "progressive geometry". What does this translate to on paper, then? Well, we're talking a 69.5-degree head angle (with 120mm fork), 72.7-degree seat angle, 435mm chainstays and a 610mm effective top tube on the medium size. Keep an eye out for the UK-specific spec too.

£TBC www.gtbicycles.com

7. Canyon Exceed CF SLX 9.9 LTD

Trail bikes aren't the only ones getting longer and slacker. Canyon have applied the same principles to their latest cross-country machine, the Exceed. Even though they've lengthened the front centre to improve stability, their meticulous attention to detail – including the use of the rear brake calliper in a structural bracing application – means the new frame weighs just 870g (claimed). The full limited edition build seen here with Bike Ahead Biturbo carbon wheels is said to weigh less than 8kg (17.6lb)!

£TBC www.canyon.com



Mondraker Factor 24

With 24in wheels, 90mm (3.1in) of travel and a 1x10 transmission, this looks ideal for little rippers!

£1,899 www.silverfish-uk.com



Focus SAM C Team

The new carbon version of the SAM boasts 160mm (6.3in) of travel, short chainstays and a slack head angle.

£4,999 www.focus-bikes.com



Nicolai Argon AM Low Fat

With a Pinion gearbox, belt drive and super-slack head angle, will this 'plus' bike ever reach production?

£TBC www.nicolai-uk.com



PYGA Industries Stage

This carbon XC machine has 95mm (3.7in) of rear travel and a chainline optimised for 1x transmissions.

£TBC www.r53sport.com »



SOFT GOODS

High-tech materials and bright colours

Looking and feeling the part should be easy in 2016 judging by the gear we spotted while trawling the huge halls of the Eurobike trade show. Helmets have more coverage and safety features than ever, while riding kit is more functional and better looking than ever. Here are some of our highlights...

1. Leatt DBX 4.0 Lite gloves

If you like a minimal feel but yearn for a little more protection, Leatt may have the answer. The DBX 4.0 Lites' Nano Grip palm is super-thin and relatively stretchy as well as being touchscreen friendly. The padding over the knuckles is made from Armourgel and positioned to take the sting out of knocks on branches and suchlike. £25 www.hotlines-uk.com

2. SixSixOne Rage Hard knee pads

What better endorsement could the Rage Hard knee pads get than being used by newly crowned DH world champ Loic Bruni? A hard shell cover over the foam padding helps the pads slide rather than snag when you hit the dirt, there are two Velcro straps to keep them secure and a mesh sleeve to combat overheating. £TBC www.hotlines-uk.com

3. Dainese Altitude clothing

Here we have the Driftec Tee and Terratec shorts, which are designed to work alongside other layers in Dainese's new Altitude line-up. The shorts are made from light yet durable four-way stretch ripstop material, while the lightweight jersey is breathable and should wick sweat well too. £89.95 (shorts) £59.95 (jersey) www.windwave.co.uk

4. 100% Aircraft helmet

The Aircraft's carbon/Kevlar composite shell has a whopping 25 vents and channels to help keep your bonce cool, is offered in two shell sizes (and three EPS sizes) for a better fit and accepts inflatable emergency release systems. Alongside a host of other features, it looks killer too and comes in four colours. £299.99 www.decade-europe.com

5. Mavic Crossmax Pro helmet

The Crossmax Pro replaces the popular Notch lid (now rebadged as the Crossride) and boasts a host of new features. Between the EPS liner and the foam padding across the brow is a wide strip of memory foam designed to improve the fit, reduce vibration and eliminate hot spots around the head when the cradle is tightened. £115 www.mavic.co.uk

6. Five Ten Kestrel Laces

This more affordable lace-up version of the Kestrel trail/enduro shoe uses a nylon (rather than carbon-infused) shank that's said to make it 15 per cent more flexible than the BOA-equipped original. The outsole is made from Five Ten's Stealth S1 rubber, not the dual-compound mix found on the pricier Kestrel. £110 www.fiveten.com



1



2



3



4



5



6

COMPONENTS

Performance tweaks and neat ideas

Looking to spruce up your ride, not buy a new one? There are plenty of new components ready to be bolted on in a bid to enhance your mountain biking experience. Here are some of the coolest bits we spotted...

1. CrankBrothers Highline dropper seatpost

After a less than perfect track record with their Kronolog post, CrankBros have replaced it with the Highline. The new dropper has 125mm of stop-anywhere adjustment and uses a hydraulic cartridge that, along with the rest of the post, is warrantied for three years. The tidy remote lever has a spherical mount for easy operation. **€350 www.extrauk.co.uk**



2. Fox Float X2 rear shock

Thanks in part to its Rod Valve System, this new rear shock from Fox has already seen its fair share of success, including helping Aaron Gwin to the 2015 Downhill World Cup overall title. The highly tunable high- and low-speed rebound and compression damping and EVOL air sleeve should make for a seriously impressive performer out in the hills. **£499 www.mojo.co.uk**



3. Nukeproof Horizon Sam Hill flat pedals

These rather flash looking flats from Nukeproof are just one of five variants in the Horizon line-up. The Sam Hill signature pedals get a polished finish and are available with a lighter Ti axle for an extra £95. Spacers let you adjust the height of the six pins at the front and rear (there are 10 in total) of the concave platform. **£79.99 www.nukeproof.com**



DMR Deathgrip grips

Developed by Brendan Fairclough, with a mix of ribbed, knurled and waffle-patterned rubber. **£14.99 www.upgradebikes.co.uk**



Fabric Chamber multi-tool

This neat little number packs a punch, with 13 tools and a solid, fixed or ratcheted driver design. **£29.99 www.fabric.cc**



CrankBros Mallet E pedals

Enduro cartridge bearings and custom Igus bushings should keep these spinning smoothly for longer. **£165 www.extrauk.co.uk**



RockShox Lyrik RCT3 fork

RockShox's big-hitter is stiffer than ever, with a new Charger damper and updated Solo Air spring. **£824 www.fisheroutdoor.co.uk**



ENGINEERED FOR LIFE

LX760

The LX series is the product of an ongoing investment program in design and technology.

The LX760 has been engineered to light the darkest of nights for you, whatever the weather. The superb output is suitable for both on and off road environments and is supported by a Panasonic battery and remote handlebar switch.

Our team of designers and engineers are dedicated to researching new technologies, materials and manufacturing methods to ensure we deliver our quality commitment.

- 1 x Cree XML (U2) LED
- 760 lumens output
- Panasonic lithium ion battery
- Over heating protection system
- CNC aluminium heat sink
- High precision optical lens
- Side visibility
- Includes remote switch



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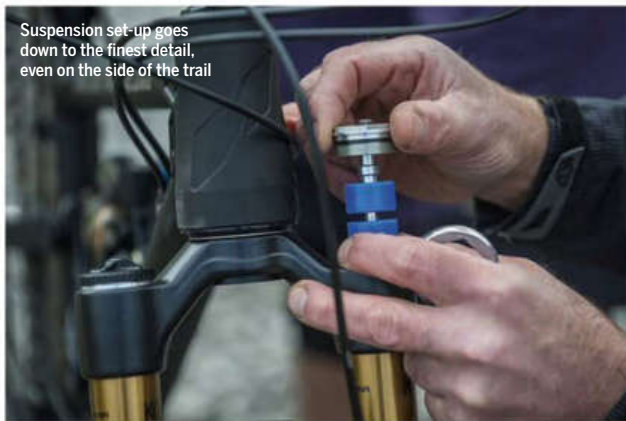
LONGER LOWER SLACKER FASTER?



Could the radical Mojo/Nicolai GeoMetron be the next MTB game changer? Jake Ireland spent the day riding it to find out

Words Jake Ireland Pics Andy Lloyd

Suspension set-up goes down to the finest detail, even on the side of the trail



ALL ABOUT THE ANGLES

There are two aspects to the GeoMetron experience – the Pro Set-Up package and the machine itself, which has the most radical geometry of any production bike

LONGER

The 620mm top tube on the shortest size makes it longer than some brands' larges, while the 1,270mm wheelbase – that's 50in! – puts DH bikes to shame

SLACKER

The 63-degree head angle sticks the front wheel way out in front for extra stability and control on the steep stuff



LOWER

The 340mm BB height improves cornering and stability. Just watch those cranks over the rocks!

FASTER

Attacking angles are backed up by custom tuned Fox dampers to produce a truly rapid ride

GeoMetron geometry

Sizes Long, Longer, Longest **Head angle** 63 degrees **Effective top tube** 620mm (all measurements for Long size with 170mm fork) **BB height** 340mm **Wheelbase** 1,270mm **Chainstays** 440mm **Front centre** 830mm **Bar height** 1,035mm **Rear travel** 155mm



Jake was soon hammering through rocks faster than on any other trail bike he's ridden



Chris Porter and his team really hone in on the finer details of your set-up





No need for fast weight shifts – sit centrally and the bike will handle it!

Could a new bike really be faster than the one I've been riding all year – on the very first run? I was doubtful, but throwing my leg over the Mojo/Nicolai GeoMetron and getting ready to set off, it did feel special. A full-on set-up process was about to culminate in my first run down the hill on a machine with truly radical geometry and sizing.

Suits you, sir

Chris Porter, the main man at UK Fox suspension specialists Mojo, has strong opinions when it comes to frame measurements. He's created some pretty extreme rides for himself – see our SuperBike in issue 303 – and has now teamed up with Germany's Nicolai to create a production bike that pushes the boundaries of trail/enduro geometry.

The GeoMetron comes in three sizes, based not on seat tube length but reach. And there's no small or medium here, just 'long', 'longer' and 'longest'! With a 620mm effective top tube, the smallest frame is as long as many brands' larges, while its 63-degree head angle and 1,270mm wheelbase put it in downhill bike territory. The 'longest' frame is even more extreme, with 35mm of additional reach. The idea is that the extra length and slack head angle add stability and confidence on the descents, while the steep seat angle puts you in a good pedalling position on the climbs.

What makes the GeoMetron even more special is that the bike you buy is totally bespoke to you, right down to crank length, chainring size, saddle shape and pedal choice. The guys at Mojo will even chop your bar down to the perfect width before you set eyes on what's one of the raddest looking bikes I've ever seen. And then, if you opt for their Pro Set-Up package, you can spend a day riding with them to get everything set up how it suits you best.

To give us a taste of the experience, Chris invited me to spend a day as a customer. He emailed me in

advance to find out my component preferences and ask some questions about my riding, and we arranged to meet at BikePark Wales.

Finding my mojo

Over a latte in the cafe, Chris warned me that the bike wouldn't be like anything I'd ridden before. He'd based the initial suspension set-up on how he'd seen me ride in the past – even down to the number of volume spacers in the Fox 36 fork and Float X shock. We'd gone for a 34t ring to optimise climbing performance and avoid hindering the suspension action on the descents, a 170mm travel fork and a 740mm bar. Because I'd given him a good idea of what spec I wanted and what I wanted the bike to do, Chris said we could spend the day getting the suspension bang on. For other riders, the session might focus more on experimenting with wheel and tyre choice or making spec changes.

The first job was to set the sag and check that the fork and shock were progressive enough for my aggressive riding style. Throwing a leg over, the GeoMetron already felt different to any trail or enduro bike I'd ridden. There was plenty of length in the top tube with a 35mm stem, and I was in a

IT ALREADY FELT DIFFERENT TO ANY TRAIL OR ENDURO BIKE I'VE RIDDEN

reassuringly central position on the bike. I was buzzing to get going! Chris's way of working is incredibly methodical and scientific. After setting the sag, he got me to bounce the suspension as hard as I could. I almost bottomed out the shock and used more travel than expected up front too, so we decided to put a larger spacer in the shock »

The man himself, Chris Porter. We wish we could read his mind sometimes



The GeoMetron is a long old boat in the air!



"Anyone got a longer tape measure?!"

and increase the fork pressure. This was a more detailed set-up than you'd get if you bought a bike from a top-notch shop, and we hadn't even touched the trails yet!

On the rocks

I thought a great place to try the bike out would be the Zut Alors rock section – part of last year's British Downhill Series (BDS) track and one of the roughest sections at BPW. Rolling in for the first time, the GeoMetron handled nice and predictably, but I felt like I was going slower than normal. The more I rode, the more I realised that I wasn't going slower, I was going faster – just with more control, and feeling more relaxed.

My riding position changed too. The super-slack head angle put the front wheel so far ahead of me that I could put more weight on the handlebar, even on rough and steep sections, and I could feel myself using muscles I don't usually use. Because I was so heavy on the fork we decided to try one with 10mm more travel. One of the fastest fork changes in the business later, I was heading back up the hill with a slacker, taller and even more extreme front end.

Safe, but scared

Starting to realise how capable the bike was, it was time to hop on the uplift and smash my way through some turns. Riding at speed felt easy, but Chris advised me to rein it in a bit and rail the turns rather than hit them late. This simple change made the bike come into its own. It's this kind of priceless advice that makes the Mojo experience unique – the day isn't just about setting your bike up to go fast, it's about creating the perfect unison of bike and rider. It was an odd experience accelerating through corners quicker than I'd ever done before – fast enough to roll the rear tyre on the rim and make the tiny side knobs deform – especially with my weight so central on the bike that I really didn't

mind that the rear was starting to slide. It felt like I could just keep leaning until the bar hit the floor. I felt totally safe, but at the same time really quite scared by the speed I was travelling at!

Coming into steep, tight switchbacks, the bike's length meant it took a bit more thinking to get line choice right, but I was still blasting through as fast

I FELT TOTALLY SAFE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME REALLY QUITE SCARED!

as on any other bike. Jumping was odd, because my perception of speed was totally out on the Mojo. I was over-jumping by quite a long way, thinking I had a lot less pace than I was actually carrying. Grip was the other area where the GeoMetron shone. Chris was the other me I no longer needed to worry about traction or compensate for any suspension shortfalls and that I should ride as if there was a grip epidemic on the trail, and it worked! By the end of the day I felt that my fitness was the only limiting factor to how fast the bike could go. I couldn't fault how the GeoMetron was working, and it was carrying me through turns and rough stuff far faster than I had any wish to go!

Lost love

Watching Chris pack the bike back into the Mojo van was a painful experience. It was as if I'd met my dream bike, the one with the personality to die for and good looks to boot, and it was being dragged home by its protective father at the end of playtime – and I didn't even get a kiss goodbye. I felt like I'd ridden a truly monumental product. Is it really that good? At everything? Yes, or at least I think so. ⚙️

THE BOTTOM LINE

How much does it cost?

£2,100 frame and shock (Fox Float X2 or X EVOL)

£3,000 frame, shock, fork (Fox 34 or 36) and dropper post (Fox DOSS)

£5,200 full bike – includes custom volume spacer and damper tuning; Shimano XTR gears; Hope cranks, headset, stem, brakes and grips; Mavic Crossmax XL wheels set up tubeless with Mavic Crossmax Quest tyres; Renthal/PRO handlebar and SDG saddle of choice

£6,000 full bike + spare wheels – includes everything above plus a set of lightweight Mavic SL wheels set up tubeless with Maxxis Ardent tyres

£5,900 full bike with Pro Set-Up – standard full bike package plus a full day's set-up with a Mojo technician. Also includes Mavic or Maxxis tyres and pedals of choice

£6,700 full bike with Pro Set-Up + Mavic SL wheels

A full-page photograph of a male cyclist wearing a blue and white jersey, black shorts, a black helmet, and orange gloves, riding a black and red Specialized Camber mountain bike. The bike has a distinctive red stripe running down the center of the frame. The cyclist is leaning forward in a racing posture, pedaling on a dirt trail. The background is a dense forest with green trees, and the image has a motion blur effect to convey speed.

NOBODY PUTS CAMBER IN THE CORNER

Nothing should be defined by what it isn't. Not big enough, not small enough—whatever. The Camber is just fine where it is. It's the ultimate speed-loving trail bike, after all. So bring this magazine with you on your next ride—you're going to need some reading material while you're waiting for your buddies at the top and bottom of the trail this weekend. specialized.com/camber



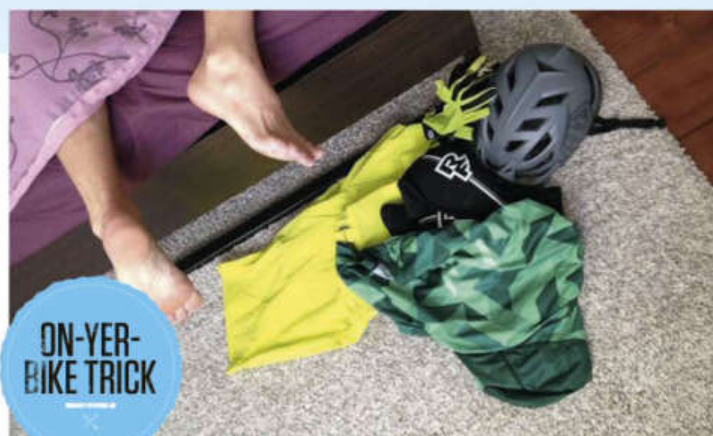


Follow these tips to maintain or even build your biking skills and keep riding when the mercury heads south



Don't approach winter as simply an exercise in staying reasonably fit, look at it as an opportunity to hone your riding skills so that you re-emerge faster than ever in summer. In winter's grimy claws your local trails become perilous labyrinths of polished roots and soap-like off-camber sections. Go and ride the trickiest one you know. At first it'll feel frustratingly slow and a bit like Bambi on ice, but stick at it over winter and you'll soon become a master at floating through zero-grip sections.

"But it's the winter, can't I just put my feet up and stay warm?" No! Absolutely not! You're a British mountain biker and, as a member of this species, you're destined to thrive in the slop and freezing cold. Why does Britain dominate the world of downhill racing? Because our little temperate island is devoid of a snow sports season. Those who ride bikes ride them all year. You can keep that fair-weather nonsense for the Europeans, so slip some 3/4-length bib shorts under your baggies and pull on a Buff – here's how to stay fit, and enjoy it, when the cold season really bites.



Need some motivation on a dark morning? Get out of bed and put your riding kit on. Once it's on, it feels like the biggest failure on earth to remove it without going riding.



There's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong gear. Layering is your best bet because you can remove or add clothing as the conditions change or the pedalling warms you up.



Baselayer

An essential layer, made from sweat-wicking fabric to move moisture away from your skin.



Jersey

For extra cold days when a baselayer and jacket aren't enough, you'll need a mid layer.



Gilet

A really handy layer. Zip it up on chilly descents, unzip it on sweaty climbs.



Jacket

A waterproof will keep you dry, while a thicker softshell will keep you toasty warm.

GLOVE LOVE

In cold weather your extremities can take a hammering. Gloves are an essential part of staying comfortable and helping you get out more often. Here's what to look for.

**1 INSULATION**

PrimaLoft and other thermal fabrics help retain heat and dry quickly.

2 WINDPROOFING

With no cold air flowing through your gloves your fingers will stay warmer.

3 SNOT WIPE

It may sound grim, but the softer and bigger the better – trust us on this.

WINTER-ISE YOUR BIKE

It's important to keep your bike in shape in the colder months too. Here's how...

**Winter tyres**

Taller knobs, wider tread spacing and lower pressures make slicing through the slop a lot easier.

**Mudguards**

The latest fork-mounted fenders will help keep you cleaner and drier.

**Lights**

Quality trail lights open up night riding opportunities while cheaper commuter numbers will get you home safe.

**Flat pedals**

Sick of clogged cleats or toppling over in the mud? Give flats a go.

GO OLD-SCHOOL



In Britain we're spoiled for choice when it comes to trail centres, but why not make the most of the short days (and avoid getting mud all over your car) by going on an old-fashioned cross-country ride straight from your back door instead? Google Maps and GPS-based apps such as Strava can help you plan a mile-munching tour of your local woods linked by sinewy back roads. It's a great way to explore your surroundings and an easy way to get some extra miles in.

A couple of pounds spent online can buy you the cheapest of digital watches. Head to your favourite local trail or plot a lengthy loop, beep it to stopwatch then press start. Nothing will push you to up the pace more than a ticking clock. Alternatively, go full bells and whistles and invest in a bar-mounted GPS system, then geek out with ride analysis and segment smashing upon your return home.

START THE CLOCK



ENTER A RACE



Local DH, enduro and XC events are an excellent excuse to both stay in shape and give racing a go. Winter races are more chilled out than summer ones and entries tend to be cheaper and easier to come by too. Knowing that you'll be strapping on a number board and pitting your mettle against other riders is just about as big a motivator as you're ever likely to get. You'll need vital bike time and plenty of fitness in order to give your best and be competitive.

NEXT ISSUE

Ride something different
ON SALE
13 NOVEMBER

ROCK STARS

The M^BUK crew head for the Dales and the gnarly terrain that makes up the 'Ard Rock Enduro



The 'Ard Rock Enduro is fast becoming one of the most talked about events on the UK calendar. Set against the glorious rolling backdrop of the Yorkshire Dales, this is a course that bites back in the form of gnarly scree, rocky chutes and steep, dusty descents. But the event is just as well known for its laidback vibe and festival feel, which are the perfect antidote to the full-on aggro riding. Spurred on by its reputation, we sent four of our team to take on the challenge. Each just about survived, albeit with very different experiences...



Determined to prove that fatbikes work everywhere, Matt doesn't half make life hard for himself!



MATT ORTON

Bike: Surly Ice Cream Truck Ops

Mods/tweaks: I switched to tough Maxxis Mammoth EXO Protection tyres and swapped my rigid steel Surly fork for a RockShox Bluto.

Best bit: Crossing the finish line – the aches and pains disappeared. The first pint tasted great too!

Worst bit: 3.8in tyres at 9psi are no fun on tarmac climbs. Cramping and pushing was frustrating. I wasn't the only one, so my pride didn't take too much of a hit.

"I hate racing and am the least competitive person you're likely to meet. In fact, the only person I'll compete against is myself. I don't usually opt to do things the easy way either, which is why I decided to do this on a fatbike.

"The 'Ard Rock is a race like no other. I started far back from the competitive early groups and found myself pedalling through the transitions with a varied mix of riders. It was easy to forget I was supposed to be trying to beat the people I was laughing and joking with.

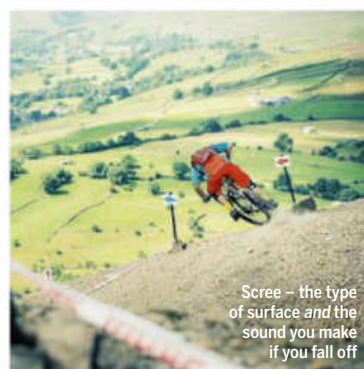
"The individual starts on each section made it a really relaxed ride, like being out with your mates. There was none of the ultra-competitive, selfish vibe some races foster – the banter was good-natured, spirits were high and everyone was made to



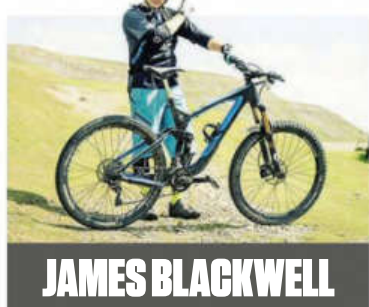
The crew take in the views – or is it just an excuse for a brief break from pedalling?

feel welcome. The stages were amazing too, and unlike anything I'd ridden before.

"Carved from a rocky, almost lunar, landscape was the faintest hint of a trail, ridden in by just a handful of people. It was a course that pushed you to the limits of your skill and nerve while punishing you on the transitions between stages. To say the 'Ard Rock lived up to its name is an understatement."



Scree – the type of surface and the sound you make if you fall off



JAMES BLACKWELL

Jimmer wasn't going to let a broken finger stop an amazing day on the bike

The 'Ard Rock lives up to its name – it's hard and, er, rocky

Bike: Marin Mount Vision C-XM8
Mods or tweaks: I fitted tougher wheels and tyres for the race – a Bontrager Rhythm and Michelin Wild Grip'R up front, and a Novatec Diablo and WTB Riddler out back.

Best bit: I loved the whole experience, though breaking my finger on the first stage wasn't ideal and I'll never try to pee in a beer can again!

“One minute into Stage 1 my game plan was out of the window, race mode had kicked in and I was going for it! As the trail opened out after a gully of waist-high ferns I gunned it, clipped a rock with my pedal and was ejected over the bars, breaking my little finger and puncturing my front tyre. In a mid-race frenzy I got straight up and pedalled hard for the finish line, just making it. After sorting the tyre tear and patching up my finger, I went on to complete what was easily the best race I've ever done, riding some of the gnarliest terrain in the UK.

“The previous day I'd beefed up my Mount Vision with a ghetto mismatched tyre/wheel set-up courtesy of our northern test guru Guy Kesteven, whose advice was to run tough tyres to avoid punctures and sidewall tears. Then it was time to tackle

the two practice stages. Saddling up among a sea of ultra-bling enduro bikes, I headed out with the rest of the *MBUK* crew. Having never ridden in the Swaledale area before it was an eye-opener – such beautiful scenery and radical trails, pretty much all rocks, dust and scree, like a mini Megavalanche – and I loved it.

“My Marin, with 140mm (5.5in) of travel, was definitely one of the shortest-travel bikes there, but it was in its element, and handled the tough terrain and gruelling climbs without any problems, as did my legs and lungs. It was the most ridiculously relaxed practice ride known to man! In fact, the pace was so laidback that I had decided to just chill out come race day, but something clicked and, as you know, that all changed when I was up against a ticking clock!

“All in all, it was one of the best weekends I've had riding and racing bikes, with a truly relaxed vibe and a hell of a lot of like-minded riders. One thing's for sure – I'll be back for 2016. So grab a bunch of mates, think up a stupid team name and get yourself registered. You won't regret it.”



WHAT MAKES THE 'ARD ROCK UNIQUE?

The timed stages all take place on private land, and without the tape and markings there wouldn't be any obvious line to follow. The 'Ard Rock team work tirelessly on the hills and with landowners to create amazing trails especially for the event. Combine that with the technical and athletic challenge, and the 'Ard Rock Enduro manages to tick all of the boxes for an epic mountain bike weekend.





Organiser Joe Rafferty shows Jimmer his 'extra fat' bike



GUY KESTEVEN

Bike: Custom Nicolai Helius AM tandem

Mods or tweaks: I put extra volume spacers in the Fox 36 Float fork to help it handle the G-outs.

Best bit: Cleaning the super-steep root and rock vert section on Stage 1 to big cheers from everyone.

Worst bit: Having to stop and scoot round the super-steep hairpin turns on Stage 4.

"I've done every 'Ard Rock event so far and they've all been brilliant, but I've properly maxed out the challenge and the fun for the past two years by doing it with my mad 10-year-old daughter Freya on our custom Nicolai 'tankdem'. My other daughter Honor helps us set up and acts as our pit crew, my wife Sarah helps in registration and it's just a brilliant 'bike festival' weekend.

"Joe Rafferty and his team work super-hard to create the most varied course possible in an already fantastic place to ride, and the distance, the climbs, the technical descents or all three take everyone to the limit. While the competition is fierce, the atmosphere is super-friendly and relaxed, both on the course and back at base at the Dales Bike Centre.

"This year's extended Stage 1 was awesome and we managed to beat 200 people overall, but I nearly lost Freya getting air through a dry stone wall drop on Stage 5 and the Stage 4 hairpins were just too tight to drift."



The enduro format lets you go flat out on the descents, then ride with your mates between stages



Guy's 'tankdem' is unstoppable – until he reaches a switchback turn



The queues built while Jimmer used the only loo



The MBUK pits



THE DETAILS

■ The 'Ard Rock takes place in the stunning Yorkshire Dales National Park. As well as three events to choose from, there's a huge campsite and expo

area with live music, entertainment, hot food and a beer tent.

■ The main Enduro covers around 40km, with well over 2,000m of climbing and descending. With

an average time of six hours, it's no easy cruise.

■ There's also a shorter 35km Enduro Sport, though it's still 'Ard, and a 40km timed XC loop.

■ Enduro riders are only timed on the special downhill stages. Their times on these stages are then added together to give them an overall time.



Want to see the action? Check out the videos on our Facebook page.



No well worn in trail centre groove here – just follow the arrows



SEB STOTT

Bike: Specialized Enduro Elite 29

Mods or tweaks: I went for a Fox 36 fork with custom 44mm offset and a super-wide Ibis 941 carbon front wheel.

Best bit: That custom fork, courtesy of Mojo Suspension.

Worst bit: Specialized don't make the Enduro 29 in an XXL size! (I'm 6ft 3in.)

"Wow. The 'Ard Rock has to be one of the biggest and best enduros I've raced, and I've done a few! The festival atmosphere was a real highlight. That's the key to turning a good race into a great weekend. The race itself was an absolute blast too though.

"Predominantly blind stages kept the racing interesting without leaving me too knackered from a full day's practice, yet the two stages we were allowed to practise allowed for some creative line choices and full-gas racing on Sunday. Perfect. Relaxed transfer times made for a sociable race day,

even if the loop was something of a marathon!

"My bike performed flawlessly too, after becoming something of an experimental test bed. The shorter offset on the Fox 36 boosted stability, while my radical wheel combo – a super-stiff, precise front wheel and compliant, traction-hunting rear wheel – suited my over-the-front riding style, even if looked a bit odd. Fourth place in Seniors suggests the Frankenbike didn't work too badly."



NEXT YEAR'S EVENT

The 2016 'Ard Rock takes place on 6-7 August, with entries going live on 30 October. Places sold out in a couple of hours this year, so act fast if you want a place! In 2016 there'll be a bigger challenge event and an expo area with huge stands from long-term sponsors Santa Cruz and Mavic. The organisers aim to keep it one of the most fun weekends of mountain biking in the UK, on unique trails with amazing scenery and a chilled-out vibe. We've also heard word of a new sister event called 'Ard Moors.

www.ardrockenduro.co.uk



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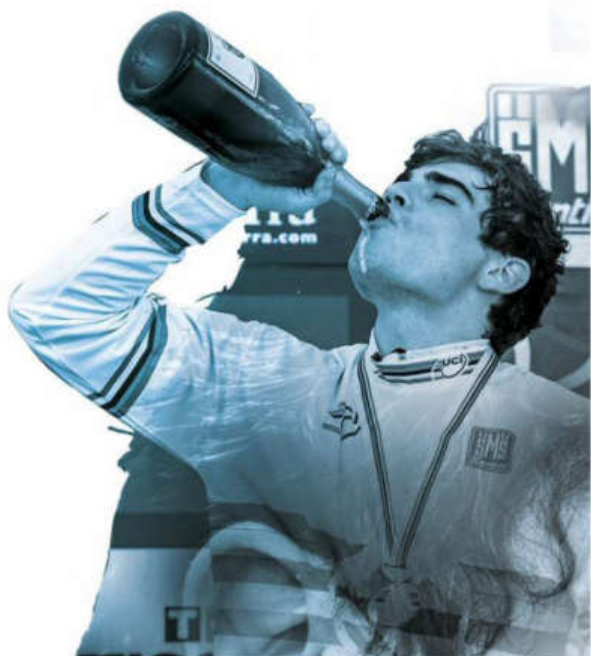
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124 GROUP TEST
Flat and clipless pedals

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VERY GOOD: One of the
best you can buy



GOOD: It'll do the job
and do it well



BELOW AVERAGE:
Flawed in some way



POOR: Simply put,
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- 01** Our test team is made up of the most respected bike and kit testers in the world
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HOW WE TEST

Detailed product check in
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for potential problems and
improvements

Hit the trails... hard!

Test in real riding
conditions till we know
everything there is to

know about the product

Re-test product with
another tester

OUR TEST TEAM

Our Technical Editor in
Chief, Rob Weaver, gets
new products in as soon
as they're available
and coordinates all the
testing through our vastly
experienced band of

reviewers. Our main bike
tester, Guy Kesteven, has
ridden nearly 3,000 bikes
over the past 26 years.

OUR TESTS ARE

Relevant
Comprehensive
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Fair
Accurate

MBUK Test Team



Rob Weaver

With two decades of riding and racing experience, Rob knows what works and what doesn't



Guy Kesteven

Our ultra-experienced northern test engine is the ultimate exposé of kit that doesn't measure up



Alex Evans

Our new Features Editor is back in the UK after seven years in the Alps and has a reputation for wrecking bikes



Seb Stott

Seb's passion for engineering helps him pick products apart, and he's no slouch on the race track either



James Blackwell

Short and fast, pinned or binned, Art Editor Jimmer has been testing kit longer than he'll happily admit to



Jake Ireland

Jake spends every day riding, and his injury list proves he's pushing the limits to provide the very best testing



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Northwave Spider Plus 2 shoes

£124.99 **i-ride** www.i-ride.co.uk

THE SPIDER PLUS 2s have a distinctive 'euro' style that sits somewhere between a '90s MTB shoe and a modern trail running shoe. Any quibbles about the looks are soon forgotten once you slip them on though.

Northwave have done a great job when it comes to fit. The soft upper, well-padded tongue and nicely shaped, roomy toe box add up to a seriously comfy shoe, and at 852g a pair they're reasonably light too. A cable-lace dial lets you adjust the tension

across your foot, while a large Velcro strap across the top ensures the shoe remains properly secure, without pinching. Well-positioned cleat slots make it easy to obtain a fairly rearward cleat position and provide a decent amount of mud clearance.

On the bike, there's enough feedback through the sole that things don't feel too vague or rigid. Stamp on the pedals and you can feel some flex through the sole, especially

when using non-caged clipless pedals. They're still more than stiff enough for long rides if you use caged clips though. Off the bike, the X-Crossbow Michelin outsole bites into the trail and the shoes feel surefooted even on dicey rocks and roots. **ROB**

MBUK
The Spider Plus 2s' looks may be divisive, but the comfort, fit and feel certainly aren't



WTB Trail Blazer TCS Light 27.5x2.8in tyre

£46 **Hotlines** www.hotlines-uk.com

WTB HAVE SETTLED on a 2.8in width for their first 650b+ tyre so there's a good chance the Trail Blazer (and its partner Scraper rim) will squeeze into your 29er frame. If it does, or you've got a 'plus' bike already, the easy-sealing TCS tubeless carcass helps fight the puncture issues we've encountered with some plus-size tyres. The almost continual centre tread is fast rolling, offsetting the kilo weight with easy acceleration and trail-smoothing low-pressure speed sustain. When leaned over, the dual-compound tread makes cornering extremely predictable. The tyre can slip or spin out without warning if you hit a wet root or rock when you're upright though. **GUY**



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GoPro HERO4 Silver action camera

£329.99 **Madison** www.madison.co.uk

AS THE FIRST GoPro with a built-in touchscreen, the HERO4 Silver was hotly anticipated. Does it live up to the hype?

Like GoPro's other cameras, the HERO4 Silver comes with curved and flat sticky mounts. It also sports their trademark clear plastic housing, but with a new 'back door' that lets you use the touchscreen without removing the camera from its protective case.

When you power the HERO4 Silver on you still get the same, recognisable GoPro beeps and, as before, you can view the camera setting, mode and the number of

clips shot on the small LCD on the front. This has been improved hugely, and is now much easier to understand.

The rear screen is where the fun really starts though. The image quality is great – clear and bright. Swipe down and hold your finger on the screen to unlock it and you have full access to all the settings menus, which are really intuitive to use even if you have little action cam experience. Once you're set, there's a small button to turn the screen off to save battery life.

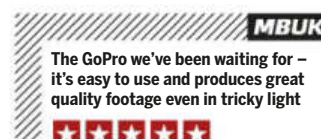
We did most of our filming in 720-pixel HD resolution at 60

frames per second, which worked a treat, with the footage playing back nice and smoothly on our not-so-powerful laptop (other modes include 720p at 120fps, 1,080p Full HD at 60fps and super-high 4k resolution at 15fps, but these all create larger files, which can lead to choppy playback).

Video quality doesn't look hugely different to the HERO3 at first glance, but spend a bit more time with the new camera and it becomes clear that it's noticeably better at dealing with rapid changes of light. It's also much easier to experiment with

the different settings, thanks to the easier-to-navigate menus, which helps you get the best possible results.

It's easy to export videos and photos to your phone with the GoPro app, and battery life doesn't seem to be affected unduly by the addition of the screen – ours easily lasted a full day while filming back-to-back downhill runs. **JAKE**



PRODUCT NEWS



Less is more

If you're a fan of lightweight knee protection, check out SixSixOne's new Recon pads, which have been developed by 10-time DH world champ Nico Vouilloz. They're kept in place by an elasticated strap, a stretchy mesh sleeve and silicone print. The futuristic-looking padding is of the highly flexible XRD variety, which firms up on impact. Head to www.hotlines-uk.com for pricing.

Try before you buy

The wizards with welders at BTR Fabrications now have a demo bike ready to roll. The Ranger is equipped with a 120mm (4.7in) travel Marzocchi 350 CR fork,



AugustWheelWorks custom wheels, Shimano brakes and SRAM GX 1x11 transmission. It'll be available to try at a series of ride days. Check out www.btr-fabrications.com for more.

Scouting about

Nukeproof have expanded their hardtail line-up to include a 29er. The Scout 290 Pro is designed with going fast in mind and boasts a slack 66-degree head angle and 130mm (5.1in) travel RockShox Pike RC fork. SRAM provide the 1x11 X1 transmission and Guide brakes, and the bike will also come with Nukeproof's revised OKLO dropper post. The top-end 29er will cost £2,000 and there'll be a cheaper Comp version for £1,600. details at www.nukeproof.com.



Five Ten Freerider Contact shoes

£100 Five Ten www.fiveten.com

THESE NEW FLAT-PEDAL

shoes from Five Ten do a good job of balancing sole flex with pedalling efficiency. While they're not quite as stiff as the more downhill-orientated Five Ten Impacts, you can spend hours pushing the pedals in the Freerider Contacts without any discomfort. The midsole is rigid enough to be efficient but not overly so, which becomes apparent when walking around off the bike.

Five Ten's Stealth Mi6 rubber sole provides vice-like grip on the pedals. Off the bike, traction

is good in the dry but the slick pedal contact patch – designed to make it easier to adjust your position on the pedals – does make pushing back up the hill in the wet pretty tricky.

On hotter days we never overheated in the Contacts, and when the inevitable happened and the rain started to fall, they managed to shrug off a couple of showers and puddle splashes before we started to feel the wet creeping in. They dry reasonably quickly too. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★★★



TSG Trunk jersey

£34.99 Ison Distribution
www.ison-distribution.com

THE TRUNK IS TSG's 3/4-length sleeve trail jersey. Look beyond the bold design and there are a few technical features that add value and make that £35 price tag even more enticing. There's a lift pass pocket on the left arm, and inside the main body of the jersey sits a hidden sunglasses wipe. The Trunk is generally comfortable, but some of our testers found the elasticated cuffs a bit tight around their forearms. When the lift pass pocket is empty the zip can be irritating, and when it's full it's even worse. The fabric wicks well though, and the underarm mesh is lovely on warm days. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★★★★

Answer Stein 143 grips

£19.99 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

NOW THAT THE weather is getting shitty and your gloves are likely to be wet and muddy, sticky grips can make a dramatic difference to control and confidence. These new Answer grips are scalloped like a German beer mug, which gives enough lips and finger dimples for good grip even if you've stuck them in the mud crashing. The super-tacky compound adds adhesion to the mix, and the small diameter and firm feel put maximum feedback into your hands. That same firm, small-diameter feel doesn't take prisoners on rocky, relentless trails or if you're running hard suspension and a stiff bar though. **GUY**

MBUK ★★★★★





Nukeproof Critical Enduro knee pads

£40 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

THESE NEW STRAPLESS, sleeved knee pads from Nukeproof are certainly comfortable, but fall short in some critical areas.

Although the pad hugs your leg tightly enough to stay firmly in place, the flexible foam knee padding sits quite flat and doesn't cup the knee as snugly as on other, similarly styled leg protection. This means the pad flares slightly when your knee is flexed, leaving the sides of the joint more exposed than we'd have liked. That said, the Critical

Enduros are a decent length and offer a good amount of coverage for lighter riding duties, with enough protection to take the sting out of the odd knock or tumble.

Comfort levels are impressive, though the thick towelling sleeve does get pretty warm, even with a large mesh panel at the rear. Even on longer sweaty rides we had no issues with the Critical Enduros slipping down our legs. **ROB**

MBUK ★★☆☆☆

CamelBak Skyline 10 LR hydration pack

£99.99 Zyro www.zyro.co.uk

JUST LIKE ITS 'Low Rider' predecessors, the Charge and Volt, the Skyline is designed to sit all of its weight nice and low on your back. This does mean the 10L pack looks a little boxy and struggles to house longer pumps. It comes with CamelBak's acclaimed 3l lumbar bladder, which has a detachable hose for quick and easy refilling.

Inside the large main compartment are a couple of mesh organiser pockets, one with a tool roll. There's a fleece-lined zipped pocket too, and the capacity to carry a full- or open-face helmet, plus one zipped and one stash pocket on the waist belt.

When you start throwing your weight from turn to turn it becomes clear just how well CamelBak have done here. The Skyline does a great job of staying put, and feels secure and comfy even during long stints in the saddle. CamelBak's superb bite valve makes drinking on the move fast and easy, though it does take time to get used to the new Tube Trap – a magnetic hook that holds the bladder hose to the shoulder strap – especially when you're really gasping. **ROB**



MBUK
MOST WANTED



ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £20 MORE TRY:**
Mavic Crossmax Hydropack
LTD 8.5 £80 www.mavic.co.uk

▼ **FOR £27 LESS TRY:**
EVOC CC 10L Team £72.95
(no bladder) www.silverfish-uk.com

The Skyline ticks just about every box, remaining just where it needs to be when the riding gets rowdy

MBUK ★★★★★

MBUK WRECKED & RATED

Brand New Kit

PRODUCT NEWS

Continued



Premium bargain

Always lusted after a Yeti but can't afford the premium price tag? The Colorado brand are introducing slightly more affordable variants of their ASR and SB5. These 'Enduro' models use a cheaper carbon lay-up, which adds a claimed 300g per frame. Both will come in one colour and one build. The ASR Enduro will set you back £3,599 and the SB5 Enduro £4,299. Check them out at www.silverfish-uk.com.

Race tuned

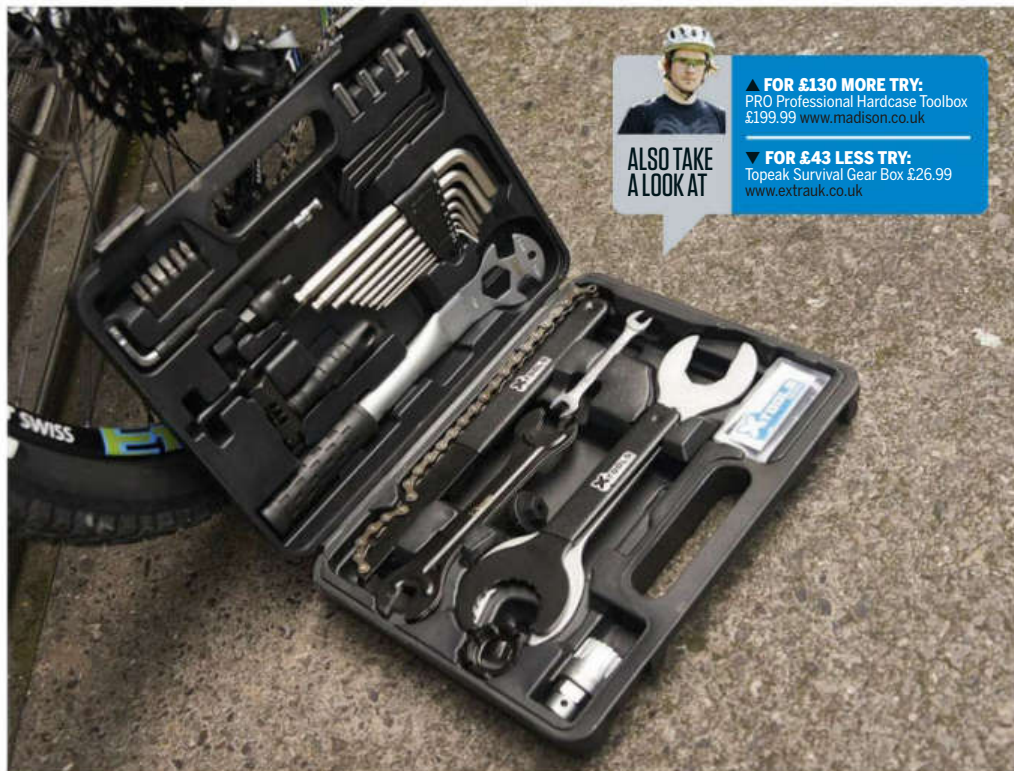
Cube have had their share of enduro racing success this year, thanks in part to the Stereo 160, which has had a load of work done. It's got a new, higher-grade carbon front triangle, a



revised, more progressive shock curve, routing for Shimano's XTR Di2 cabling and wider 12x148mm rear axle spacing, among a host of other changes. The top-spec Stereo 160 C:68 Action Team will set you back £4,599. Have a ganders at www.cube.eu.

Weight loss

NS have treated the Snabb full-susser to a makeover for 2016, giving it the full (apart from the chainstays) carbon treatment. This saves around 100g over the aluminium frame. The geometry, with the exception of the lower bottom bracket, is the same as on the 2015 Snabb Enduro. We've no more info just yet – keep your eyes glued to www.hotlines-uk.com.



ALSO TAKE
A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £130 MORE TRY:**
PRO Professional Hardcase Toolbox
£199.99 www.madison.co.uk

▼ **FOR £43 LESS TRY:**
Topeak Survival Gear Box £26.99
www.extrauk.co.uk

X-Tools Bike Tool Kit

£70 **Hotlines** www.hotlines-uk.com

A GOOD QUALITY tool kit is a canny investment. This relatively affordable offering contains 37 tools, including Allen keys from 2mm to 10mm. The ball ends make out-of-the-way bolts more accessible but longer handles would make it easier to remove stubborn pedals or cranks.

Also provided are a chain splitter, pedal spanner, chain whip, cassette tool, six-sided spoke key, cone spanners and external BB and crank cap tools,

all of which work well. The trio of (slightly flimsy) tyre levers and puncture repair kit are a bonus.

Some of the other tools are less useful. The internal BB tool and square-taper crank extractor are largely redundant for work on modern bikes, and the headset spanner is something of a relic. One thing that is needed these days is a decent range of Torx keys, and only two sizes are provided – T25 and T30, admittedly the most useful. The

final tool is a socket driver with four screwdriver heads and four sockets (7, 8, 9 and 10mm). It's a little fiddly, but gets the job done.

The box itself is tricky to pack up without tools coming loose and stopping you closing the lid. It's easy to carry though. **SEB**



MBUK
This is a solid entry-level tool kit, but some of the contents are rather outdated

Witter ZX504 four-bike car rack

£600 **Witter Towbar Systems** www.witter-towbars.co.uk

THIS TOWBAR-MOUNTED rack is an impressively large beast and can carry up to four bikes, with a weight limit of 60kg. Weighing 23kg unladen, you need to be pretty strong to manhandle it onto your car. Fitting it for the first time requires some studying, but the five-step procedure is logical once you're familiar with it.

Attaching bikes is a bit like playing Tetris. Once they're on, there's a fair bit of side-to-side movement. This is due to lateral play in the pivots that allow the

rack to be folded up when not in use, movement of the arms that grip the bikes and the lack of a ratchet mechanism on the wheel straps. The rack fits close to the boot, so on a hatchback you may need to turn wide bars.

The fold-up feature is useful and you can lock the bikes to the rack. It requires patience to get it set up properly though, and the added weight is noticeable when driving, even with only one bike on board. **ALEX**



BRAND NEW KIT



ALSO TAKE
A LOOK AT

▼ **FOR £65 MORE TRY:**
Easton Vice XLT £669.98
www.silverfish-uk.com

▼ **FOR £300 LESS TRY:**
Kinesis Maxlight £399.99
www.upgradebikes.co.uk

Miche 988RR 650b wheelset

£655.99 Chicken CycleKit www.chickencycles.co.uk

IF YOU RUN narrow tyres and want to seriously lighten your bike, these Italian wheels should go straight in your basket. We always take manufacturers' weights with a pinch of salt, but at 650g front, 800g rear, the 988RRs weigh less than claimed and are some of the lightest alloy hoops available.

While freehub engagement is relatively slow, with a maximum lag of 18 degrees, once they connect they accelerate with breathtaking ease. They'll likely knock a big chunk of static

weight off your bike too. While a lot of the weight loss comes from the low, narrow, asymmetric-spoked rim, they also use triple-butt Sapim spokes, plus titanium hub guts.

The rims are tubeless ready with a seal kit, and there are adapters for 15mm and 142x12mm axles. Despite an exposed face on the drive side, the SKF bearings are still running sweet and the wheels remain tight and true, which mirrors our long-term experience with Miche hoops.

The conventional J-bend spokes are easy to replace if you're careful with the alloy nipples too.

With a 20mm internal width they're only suitable for 2.2in or slimmer tyres though, and unsurprisingly for their weight, there's noticeable flex if you really push them through corners or rock heaps. **GU Y**



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MBUK WRECKED & RATED

Brand New Kit

THE SMALL STUFF MTB BITS AND PIECES



TOPEAK IGLOW CAGE AND BOTTLE

£24.99 Extra UK

www.extrauk.co.uk

If you use a water bottle and regularly ride on the road at night, Topeak's iGlow cage could be just the ticket. Not only does it hold a bottle securely, it also lights up to improve side-on visibility. There's a variety of colours and flashing modes to choose from. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★★★



CLUG BIKE HANGER

£15.99 CLUG www.getclug.com

The wall-mounted CLUG replaces those ugly front wheel hooks. Installing it is a piece of cake and it works well – it fits your wheels. The largest size is said to accommodate 1.8-2.5in tyres but we couldn't fit anything bigger than a 2.3in. Wide rims can cause problems too. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★★★★



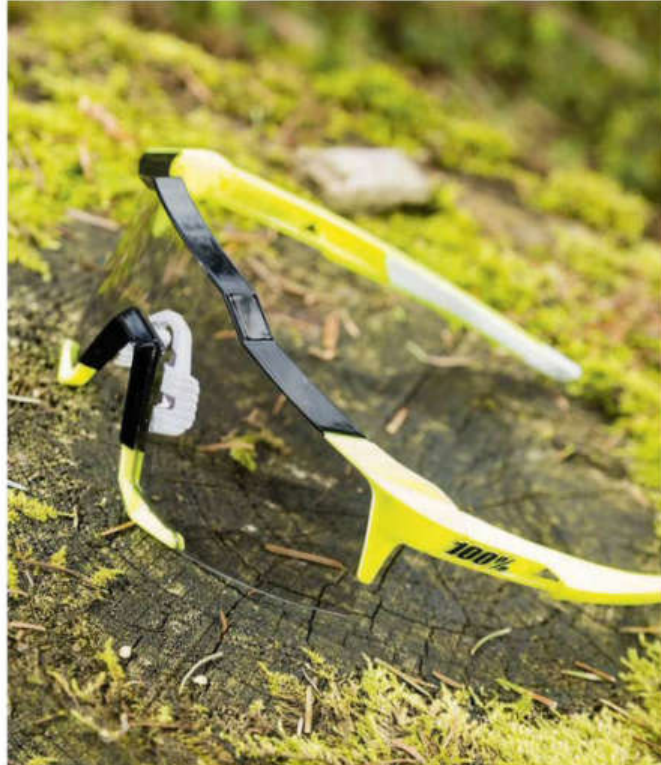
WICKENS & SODERSTROM NO.2 HL GREASE

£24 Wickens & Soderstrom

www.wickenssoderstrom.com

This is a high-load waterproof grease for all conditions. We've found it to last well, keeping water out of multiple headsets over time. It's best to only use a small amount, or it seems to attract a lot of dirt. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★★★★



100% Speedcraft LL glasses

£139.99 Decade Europe www.decade-europe.com

NOT EVERYONE WILL be taken with the Speedcraft glasses' throwback looks and whopper of a lens, but they offer loads of coverage and sun protection.

The head-hugging fit is very comfy and, thanks in part to the rubber inserts on the arms and the flexible nose piece, we had no issues with the glasses moving, even on rocky trails.

We used the smoke lens, which offered impressive clarity and plenty of protection in

bright light. It also worked OK in darker, wooded situations.

The small vents at the bottom of the lens do help stave off fogging initially, but don't eliminate it completely. If you want to switch lenses, it's a rapid, stress free affair.

After using the Speedcrafts with various helmets, it's so far only the Bell Super that we've had any fit issues with. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★★★



Goodridge braided hose

£8.99/m (hose) + £28 (fittings, per brake)

Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

AFTERMARKET HOUSING

FROM Goodridge was once a must-have product with a big performance benefit. Now that manufacturers spec better brake lines as standard, is it still worth the big-money upgrade?

Fitting is best done by a competent mechanic or a bike shop, because the braiding makes the hose prone to fraying and requires some fiddly cutting. We fitted the kit to some SRAM Guide RSC brakes, and after bleeding them they certainly had a solid feel, though it was hard to identify any significant difference in performance over the original SRAM hose. The Goodridge hose comes in 11 colours, and we must admit the red option looks pretty cool. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★★★★

Alpinestars Evolution Jacket body armour

£144.99 i-ride www.i-ride.co.uk



THE EVOLUTION JACKET is Alpinestars' one-stop shop for enduro and downhill duties, packing removable back and shoulder protection, as well as some lightweight chest padding, into a lightweight, almost compression-fit style top.

It's easy to get on thanks to the full-length zip, which ends just below the sternum. The mesh material means heat can escape easily and things don't get too sweaty, and the protection stays in place while you're on the bike and doesn't tend to twist or move when

you hit the dirt. The shoulder pads are some of the most comfortable we've tried but can feel a tiny bit bulky. Remove them and the jacket becomes almost unnoticeable while riding. It vents extremely well too, considering the long, foam-like back protector.

There are two small pockets for energy gels and there's even room for a hydration bladder in the back protector pocket, with loops for the hose over the shoulders. **JAKE**

MBUK ★★★★★

BRAND NEW KIT



Madison Alpine FR shorts

£54.99 **Madison** www.madison.co.uk

FOUR-WAY STRETCH fabric and a well-considered cut mean the Alpine FR shorts fit well and are comfortable when used on longer days in the saddle. The ratchet closure makes it easy to get the fit right around the waist, and although it doesn't offer the same amount of adjustment as twin Velcro tabs, we never had an issue with getting the shorts cinched up

just right. Two small, well positioned, rear facing hip pockets provide room to stow the essentials, though if the zipped openings were a touch wider it would make it easier to fit bigger smartphones in. The length feels spot on and the legs work well with all the knee pads we've tried. **ROB**

MBUK ★★★★★

Nukeproof Horizon Pro flat pedals

£74.99 **Hotlines** www.hotlines-uk.com

DEVELOPED BY THE CRC/ Nukeproof team – including former DH world champ Sam Hill – the Horizon Pro pedals offer up 10 pins per side, a slightly concave, 100mm wide platform and a reasonable weight of 444g the pair (with chromoly axle). You can adjust the height of the six pins at the front and rear (the other four are grub screws), which thread in from the reverse side of the platform, by removing/adding the washers provided. This gives you roughly 1mm of additional pin length to play with – great for tailoring grip, not so good for your shins.

The platform is roomy enough to accommodate clumpy Five Ten soles and makes for a nice big target to get your foot back onto after a quick dab. It's approximately 12mm deep so there's plenty of ground clearance, and when we have snagged the pedals on rocks they've shrugged off all but superficial damage with ease. When it comes to grip, the 10 pins coupled with the foot-cupping shape make for a glue-like connection between pedal and shoe. Add to that the decent price and we think Nukeproof are onto a winner. You can get pricier but lighter Ti axle versions too. **ROB**



ALSO TAKE
A LOOK AT

▲ **FOR £25 MORE TRY:**
DMR Vault £99.99
www.upgradebikes.co.uk

▼ **FOR £35 LESS TRY:**
Superstar Nano-X £39.99
www.superstarcomponents.co.uk

The Horizons offer ridiculous amounts of traction and a well-shaped, decently wide platform at a reasonable price

★★★★★

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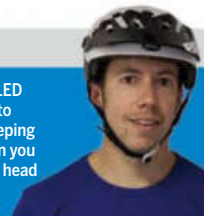
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REAR LIGHTS

Why upgrade...?

"A small rechargeable rear LED that you can quickly clip onto your bike is essential for keeping safe on those evenings when you go for 'just one more run' or head home via the pub."



£34.99

Cygolite Hotshot SL

Extra UK www.extrauk.co.uk

SO GOOD... The Hotshot SL is fairly bright, with a wide field of visibility that makes it easy to see from the side. It's simple to operate and the recessed buttons mean it won't turn on in your pack.

NO GOOD... It's fairly big for the amount of light it puts out and has a cheap, plasticky feel to it. You have to use a Phillips screwdriver to mount the bracket to your bike, so you can't pop it off and on quickly (though you can remove the light itself from the bracket without tools). We found little use for the adjustable flash function – it doesn't add much to the performance and likely contributes to the high price.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



£24.99

Electron POD USB

Madison www.madison.co.uk

SO GOOD... This light's lens doubles up as its switch. This makes it easy to toggle between modes in bulky winter gloves and means there's no fiddling around trying to find buttons in the dark. We like the POD's sleek modern looks and the angled mount works well on both seatposts and seatstays.

NO GOOD... The Electron was the dimmest light on test, with a claimed output of just 15 lumens – not much for £25. Though the rubber band mount is easy to use and effective on seatposts the light can't easily be attached to bags or helmets. Despite being low on lumens it's also slow to recharge.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



£34.99

CatEye Rapid X

Zyro www.zyro.co.uk

SO GOOD... An unusual curved design gives the Rapid X a strip-light effect that provides great visibility from behind and the sides. Its large lit area also makes it seem brighter than its claimed 25-lumen output would suggest. It has a useful battery save mode that'll switch to a lower power setting to get you home rather than letting the light completely die.

NO GOOD... The rubber O-ring fitting feels worryingly thin and is very fiddly to use, especially with gloves on. There's no secure way of mounting the light on bags or helmets and the battery only lasts an hour on full power.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



£24.99

Moon Ring

Raleigh www.raleigh.co.uk

SO GOOD... The Ring has a quality feel about it, with a CNC-machined aluminium heat sink casing and a striking circular LED arrangement for great rear visibility. The rubber strap bracket is easy to mount to your bike and the light itself has a built-in clip so you can attach it to your belt or bag. It's also small enough that you could mount it on your helmet with a ziptie. At just under £25 it's decent value for money given its solid build and performance.

NO GOOD... The Moon light's small and slimline design means that side visibility is limited and certainly not as impressive as others on test.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



£39.99

Lezyne Strip Drive Pro

Upgrade Bikes www.upgradebikes.co.uk

SO GOOD... Lezyne's Strip Drive Pro is the brightest and most powerful light on test by some margin, with a claimed 100-lumen output that offers great visibility from the rear and sides. Its simple operation and rugged construction mean it should last a long time and stand up to heavy commuting use as well as getting you home from the trails. In economy mode it offers seriously impressive battery life.

NO GOOD... It's the biggest, heaviest light on test and can't be mounted on a helmet or pack easily. With no charging cable it can be tricky to plug into slimline laptops or if space is limited around your computer.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆



£21.99

INFINI Lava I-260R

Madison www.madison.co.uk

SO GOOD... It may be the cheapest light on test but the Lava has a real feel of quality, with great brightness and visibility from all directions. The two constant and two flashing modes are useful and easy to toggle between. It can be mounted pretty much anywhere on your bike or kit, and, combined with its small size and weight, this makes it very versatile.

NO GOOD... The prominent main button means it can switch on accidentally in your bag or pocket.

MBUK ★★☆☆☆





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Photos: © Laurence Crossman-Emms

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The GT's been a brilliant test bed, but more than that it's been a blast to ride

GUY'S GT FORCE CARBON EXPERT

£3,499.99 GT Bicycles www.gtbicycles.com



It's coming up to a year of relentless hard-working hammer for the Force and I'm still always keen to take its distinctively smooth,

high-traction characteristics out onto the trails. Feedback from the team of long-term riders who help us put extra miles and vertical metres on it has been consistently positive too, especially from those who mix serious descending with the determination to claw back up the steepest, loosest slopes rather than hopping off and shoving.

The complicated three-piece frame has had a ton of test kit thrown at it but there's no wobble and the bearings still feel smooth. Despite hosting several forks the headset is fine too, and I'm still in love with the smooth, carbon mimicking ride of the Spank Vibrocore bar. Since I sorted out an

initial problem with a remote cable that was too short and automatically dropped the seat whenever I turned left, the LEV Integra dropper post has proved that KS deserve one of the best reliability reputations around too.

After initial confusion over the multiple installation tools, the Hope crankset is settling in nicely ahead of our big group test in a few issues. The e*thirteen EX Cog has been a godsend in maximising the ultra-sticky climbing traction of the GT too. While it doesn't look grippy in the slightest, the Schwalbe Rock Razor rear tyre has an amazing combination of triple compound and bombproof-yet-tactile carcass that leaves a lot of slow rolling, noisy knobbed rubber spinning on the steepes.

As well as the DMR wheels I talked about last month, there are two other products that

have re-proven themselves after a poor start. After our first set suffered crash damage worryingly easily, the four-pot Magura MT5 brakes have been consistently super-powerful, if a little blunt in delivery and awkward to realign the pads in. The replacement Manitou Mattoc Expert fork has exhibited none of the gradual air bleed issues we suffered on our group test sample either, so expect it to score much higher come our 2016 tests. All that kit will likely be transferred straight onto my new long-travel long-term frame that's sat here in the workshop waiting, so keep watching to find out what I'll be riding next year.

SPEC DECK

SPANK Oozy 760 LTD Vibrocore **£74.99** www.hotlines-uk.com

MANITOU MATTOC EXPERT **£499.99** www.hotlines-uk.com

SCHWALBE ROCK RAZOR SUPER GRAVITY TL EASY TRAILSTAR **£54.99** www.schwalbe.co.uk

MBUK Machines

We ride these long-term test bikes hard for a year, constantly scrutinising new kit, to bring you nothing but the truth about their performance



Rob's still not sold on Shimano's XTR Di2 shifters

ROB'S SCOTT SPARK 700 ULTIMATE DI2

£8,499 Scott Sports www.scott-sports.com



The Spark has seen more than its fair share of local loop action this month. Weighing just 11.4kg (25lb, with pedals), it's happy to lap up mile after mile at speed, even tackling the steeper climbs with little fuss.

I've been fiddling around with the XTR Di2 transmission using Shimano's E-Tube program. It's a bit surreal sitting in your living room with a bike plugged into your laptop. Thankfully the

muddy tyres weren't on the carpet for too long because the software was easy to use. I was keen to switch the shifter paddle function around so things felt more natural. Even after this change they're not as easy to use as the mechanical equivalent. Why Shimano didn't go the whole hog and develop something a little more futuristic I don't know. The slider switch that actuates the different suspension modes, on the other hand, is a revelation and

something I use constantly. It's tiny too, which helps to keep the handlebar uncluttered.

With things getting wetter, I've had to bid farewell to the Schwalbe Rocket Ron tyres. Their PaceStar compound and relatively low volume meant they were rapid rollers but couldn't hack the rocks and roots on my regular lap. A set of Continental Trail King 2.2ins has replaced them. These feel far more surefooted when crossing cambered root sections.

JIMMER'S MARIN MOUNT VISION C-MX8

£3,500 Paligap www.paligap.cc



It seems that my 'Ard Rock Enduro tyre combo doesn't inspire quite as much confidence down south amid roots and mud as it did up north in the rocky badlands of Yorkshire! I'll have to go back to the original Schwalbe rubber or have a rethink entirely I reckon. On a more positive note, switching from my long-standing Shimano XT pedals to some CrankBrothers Mallets has been a good move. I like the increased float and haven't had a comedy mid-air clip-out in weeks. I'm a convert!



Jimmer's set-up was ideal for the 'Ard Rock but isn't so good in the West Country



Ric's Sommet is in need of a bit of TLC after months of rough treatment

RIC'S VITUS SOMMET VRX

£2,699 Vitus Bikes www.vitusbikes.com



The story of my

Sommet VRX this month is one of neglect.

My name is Ric McLaughlin and I'm a

bad owner. There, I've said it. I've been kept busy by the closing rounds of the UCI World Cup circus, and as a result rides on the Vitus have been rushed, hastily grabbed affairs. As I type this, she's sitting in my shed coated in mud and mess. The work required doesn't stop at a quick once-over with the hose, mind you. I need some new brake pads, the Reverb dropper post could do with a bleed and I'm in need of some fresh rubber.

I've been really impressed with the WTB Vigilante front tyre but less so with the Trail Boss at the rear. It's a semi-slick and is a big fan of letting go on roots, of which there are plenty on my favourite trails. Over the past month or so it's worn to the point where it lets go at even a whiff of a nearby sapling, so I'm on the hunt for some new treads. There's already some new rubber getting bedded in on my bar, in the form of ANVL's Rasp grips. I was a big fan of my old Renthal slide-ons but they were moving about a bit much. The Rasps have a single lockring, which is ideal because I always end up with my hands right out on the edges of the bar.



GUY'S WHYTE T-130 SX

£1,999 Whyte Bikes www.whyte.bike



I guessed that the Whyte was going to be worked even harder than most long-term bikes and it's definitely the bike that's been fought over most by our northern wrecking crew. It's a versatile and enjoyable ride that never feels out of its depth whether it's on an XC epic or a Strava smash round Stainburn and Ilkley Moor. Having ridden the 2016 T-130 it does feel a bit stumpy, steep and, well, conventional after the typically radical Whyte characteristics of the new bike.



MATT'S SURLY ICT OPS

£2,199.99 Ison Distribution www.ison-distribution



With no events this month I've had a chance to have a play with something a bit different up front thanks to the guys at Lauf Forks. At 1,130kg, their leaf-sprung Carbonara is 580g lighter than my RockShox Bluto. It'll be interesting to see if the drop in weight is worth the compromise in travel and adjustability. One thing's for sure, I've been getting even stranger looks on the trail than I usually do – and from a fatbiker, that's saying something!



JAKE'S MERIDA ONE-SIXTY 7.900

£3,250 Merida Bikes www.merida-bikes.com



The Merida is out of hibernation now I'm back in the country for the winter, and I've already put in many a mile on it with a mind to sorting out my issues with its pedalling performance. The geometry is sorted so it's a shame the rear end is about as inspiring as a world of beige. I've had some issues with the gear outer fraying where it hangs under the BB shell too, so I've put a freshie on in the hope it won't happen again. Other than that, she's been good.

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- C4 pad.



- Sublimation TPU Fabric Panel.
- Solid Black Fabric 240g/m2.
- TPU Black Fabric.

B-392-C4

Gents Pro TPU Bib Tights

- TPU microfleece fabric.
- Winter fabric, lycra microfleece.
- Sublimation panels.
- SG-2 gripper on leg opening.
- Front zipper with self lock zipper puller.
- Reflective back zippers with Self lock zipper puller.
- C4 pad.



- Solid TPU Fabric.
- Sublimation Lycra Microfleece.
- Solid Lycra Microfleece.



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JCW'S INTENSE CARBINE 29

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The Carbine 29 Expert comes ready to shred straight off the shop floor, but with a few grams to shed and a load of narrow/

wide rings in the office awaiting testing I figured a single-ring conversion would be a good way to kill two birds with one stone. It wasn't a hard decision – I've grown used to the silence and simplicity of 1x10, so although the stock 2x10 XT set-up worked perfectly well, it always seemed a bit of an anachronism.

Now, I'm not suggesting you should buy a £5k+ bike and then replace half the drivetrain. In fact, if you like the sound of the Carbine and want a single chainring the Pro model looks a good shout, with 11-speed SRAM kit and an upgraded fork, shock and wheels for £200 more. But we hang onto these machines for a year as much for the purposes of testing kit as reviewing the bikes themselves.

So off came the front mech, shifter, cable, chainrings and various sprockets, and on went an absoluteBLACK 28-40t cassette adaptor and lockring, paired with a 32t Renthall 1XR chainring up front. Then off came the ring again – the legs of the crank spider were interfering with the chain, so I switched to a 34t OneUp Components job instead. With a streamlined transmission and the best part of 400g saved I was all set for a long weekend of riding in Wales.

The Intense was the perfect bike for The Beast at Coed-y-Brenin, with enough travel for the rocks and a big-wheeled advantage on the (many) fireroads. I just longed for a smaller chainring so I could spin, not grind, my way up the hills. It was spot-on at BikePark Wales too – though the tight switchbacks on Bonneyville required some serious commitment with those big wheels!

SPEC DECK

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MONTANUS
THE WEAR

MBUK WRECKED & RATED

Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS

£1,200-£1,600



THE LINE-UP



KINESIS DECADE
VIRSA X5 **£1,199**



NINER EMD 9 1-STAR
£1,399



SURLY KARATE
MONKEY OPS **£1,599.99**



ONZA PAYOFF
£1,600

Words Guy Kesteven Pics Russell Burton

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS

With football and fishing being the UK's number one spectator and participant sports, tackling the trails rather than watching tackles or dangling tackle in a pond already marks mountain bikers out as alternative thinkers. But some riders choose to separate themselves out even further by seeking a rare breeds bike – maybe because that brand identity chimes better with their own character or image, or in the hope that it'll deliver a different experience on the trail. Small companies producing low numbers of bikes can struggle to compete with bigger brands when it comes to cost. In many cases that premium pricing is even part of the appeal, adding extra exclusivity. But as our selection of bikes this month proves, not all offbeat brands charge a fortune. Do these hardtails still offer something genuinely different though, and are they worth buying? »



THE TESTER

Guy Kesteven

Whether it's a supermarket super-bargain or the most exotic upper-echelon hand-built frame, every bike our Kes and his northern wrecking crew tests gets the same exacting, exhaustive treatment on the toughest trails.

Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS
£1,200-£1,600

LIMITED DROP

The S-bent seat tube allows big tyre clearances within a reasonable length rear end but limits how far you can drop the saddle on steeper trails

WARTS AND ALL

The distinctive semi-clear-coat paint finish leaves all the welding details and heat marks of the Karate Monkey's frame clearly visible

AXLE OPTIONS

Surly were one of the first brands to offer replaceable dropout sections for different axles and the Karate Monkey comes with 142x12mm as standard

SURLY KARATE MONKEY OPS

£1,599.99

Pioneering big-wheeler from the punkest brand in the business

SO GOOD

Super-smooth yet bombproof frame

Deore stop/go kit and quality wheels are a recipe for relentless mileage

NO GOOD

Shock-shrugging frame sucks the sting from any acceleration of the already heavy bike

Steep handling and limited seat drop make it a cruiser, not a playbike

JARGON BUSTER

Center Lock

Shimano's splined brake rotor standard that uses a freehub style locking to secure the disc instead of bolts.

Gusset

An extra piece of metal welded on at a high stress area to spread any impact loads along the length of the tube.

Surly's Karate Monkey hardtail was one of the first widely available 29ers. Can a revamp keep this iconic big-wheeler competitive in the 'eclectic yet economical' category?

The frame

Surly have used their double-buttressed 'Natch' chromoly steel tubeset to build ultra-tough workhorse bikes for years. If you want a frame that can take an implausible amount of punishment on home trails or riding round the world and shrug it off smoothly, then the Karate Monkey is ideal. Despite reinforcing gussets on the top and head tubes plus a small triangulating reinforcing pipe for the seat tube it's not massively heavy. That means you're not going to rupture your own gusset if you have to carry it when the trail gives up or the gears run out.

While the Karate Monkey has spent most of its history as a fully rigid singlespeed bike (still available at £1,049.99, or £574.99 for frame and fork) the new Ops version sports Surly's 'Modular Dropout System', which lets you choose between horizontal (singlespeed), vertical (QR)

or 142x12mm (found here) dropouts. Bolted mounts for a rear mudguard and pannier rack tick the workday utility boxes, and a 44mm head tube makes it tapered fork steerer compatible. The S-bent seat tube limits how far you can drop the seatpost on steep or rough terrain dramatically though, and the 27.2mm diameter restricts choice if you want to upgrade to a dropper post further down the line.

The kit

With a kit list that's all about smooth durability it's no surprise to see a smooth-stroking, tapered-top Fox 32 Float fork with 100mm (3.9in) of travel heading up the spec. A 15mm front axle matches the through-axle out back, and there are Center Lock rotors on the durable and user serviceable but heavy Shimano Deore hubs. DT Swiss Champion spokes are a high-quality bonus in a field of otherwise anonymous wheel wires and the Alex XD rims are proven hoops.

Shimano's Deore groupset also takes care of the 2x10 transmission and the M615 brakes, which give more feel and control than the cheaper M447 stoppers found on the Niner

and Onza – something that was immediately obvious when swapping between bikes in sketchy conditions.

The wide (750mm), flat Surly bar gives enhanced steering leverage and the long (90mm) stem adds steadiness to the steep 72-degree steering angle. The low-knob Maxxis Ardent tyres let you brake and drive a lot harder than you might expect from their fast-rolling tread. Their massive 2.4in volume (the "Fatties fit fine" script on the Surly's chainstays is correct) and the generously padded Velo saddle add extra smoothness to the Karate Monkey.

The ride

It's clear straight away that there's not just a fat saddle and tyres between you and the trail, but a seriously smooth, shock absorbing frame in classic steel style. Even with a rock-proof 30psi in the 2.4in Ardents there's less clatter and fewer sharp-edged shocks getting through to your shorts than on some more aggressively damped full-suspension bikes on smaller stutter bump/root infested trails. That immediately makes the Karate Monkey a relaxing and low-fatigue way to spend time off-road, and the longer

IT'S A RELAXING WAY TO SPEND TIME OFF-ROAD, AND THE LONGER YOU RIDE THE SURLY, THE MORE FRIENDLY AND FORGIVING IT FEELS

you ride the Surly, the more friendly and forgiving it feels compared to the other bikes here.

The supple fork and skinny double-butt pipework (the top tube is 28mm in diameter and the down tube 34mm) combine with the extra-large 29er wheels to shrug off speed-killing bumps and keep momentum high. The compliance in the frame also keeps the tyres stuck to the ground better than you'd expect whether you're cornering or putting the power down, and it means you're less likely to get knocked off your pedalling rhythm by rut or rock impacts too. The highest bottom bracket on test also means less

chance of crank contact over sections of broken ground.

While traction and uninterrupted tempo pedalling are definitely a strongpoint of the Surly, direct power transfer isn't. The same flex that soaks up bumps also delays power delivery slightly, so it surges smoothly rather than stabbing forwards when you give it full gas. That skinny top tube means any heaving of the big bar will twist the frame noticeably rather than creating maximum torque at the rear wheel too.

While most of the extra weight of the heaviest wheels on test is in the hubs where it matters least, the big diameter and big tyres don't do acceleration any favours either. The

steep head angle makes the front wheel feel light and easy to twist into corners, and the short stays and wheelbase make it feel comparatively nimble for a 29er on tight trails. There's no muscle in the frame to push power lines through rough corners or give pinpoint wheel placement though, so it's best to let the Karate Monkey find its own surefootedly supple way through trouble rather than trying to stick rigidly to specific lines. »

MBUK

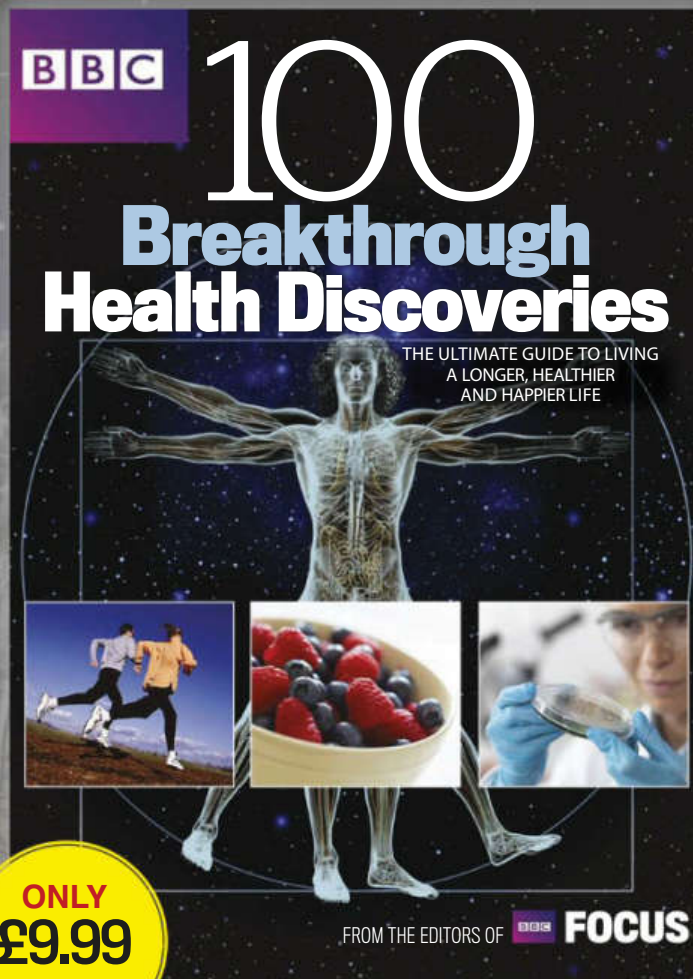
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high-speed hammering



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RIPPING RIDE

The Decade VIRSA's high-quality steel frame delivers a noticeably responsive but impact-skimming ride

WRONG FORK

X-Fusion's Sweep is a tough trail bargain but 140mm is too much travel for this bike, which works better with a 120mm or even 100mm fork

SWAP SHOP

The replaceable 'Swopout' dropouts for different axles are borrowed from Kinesis's sister bike brand, DMR

KINESIS DECADE VIRSA X5

£1,199 *Top-value steel XC frame, but complete bike is compromised*

SO GOOD

Great value, lively riding steel frame

Maxlight wheels, Strut bar and Sweep fork are cost-effective faves

NO GOOD

Geometry is best suited to a 100 to 110mm fork, which restricts the VIRSA's rowdy potential

Complete bike is undermined by second-rate stop/go componentry

JARGON BUSTER

Double butted

Tubing that has a thinner wall in the centre and thicker ends to handle higher loads/welding heat.

Horizontal dropouts

Wheel-holding sections with a horizontal slot so the wheel can be slid backwards/forwards to adjust chain tension in singlespeed set-ups.

The Kinesis range has always been a go-to for cost-effective frames and their steel Decade VIRSA is no exception. The complete bike package doesn't really do the chassis justice though.

The frame

If you've been in the biking game for a couple of decades you'll recognise the Tange Prestige name and this latest 'Japan' version is a top-quality double-butted steel tubeset. Kinesis have used it to create a versatile frame that'll stand the test of time too. The ring-reinforced 44mm head tube can take a tapered fork, and the closed triangular box gusset behind the head tube and the relatively big top and down tubes (31mm and 38mm in diameter, respectively) mean the frame can cope with 130mm (5.1in) travel forks without worry.

At the far end, switchable 'Swopout' dropouts from Upgrade Bikes stables DMR allow any sort of rear axle configuration. Our sample came with a fixed-lever 142x12mm axle but there's even a horizontal dropout option that combines with the slotted sliding brake mounts for easy singlespeed conversion. Dented,

tapered stays just about give room for a muddy 2.3in tyre and the wishbone seatstays are a classic steel bike design feature. The 27.2mm seat tube limits dropper post choices but the lack of seat tube bottle mounts means you can slam a conventional post if you need to. Three colours are available and at £349.99 for such a high quality, versatile frame it's a bargain.

The kit

There are some really good own-brand kit highlights in this fixed-spec package too. The Maxlight IX wheels are light and lively with tubeless-ready rims of a reasonable width, creating a great rolling chassis with the Decade VIRSA frame. The Kinesis Strut carbon flat bar is one of our favourite trail/XC bars too, with a really comfy feel and very low weight for under £100.

The X-Fusion Sweep fork is a solidly predictable performer with loads of mid-stroke support and steering precision. The 140mm (5.5in) stroke lifts the front end right up though, taking the bottom bracket sky high with it and slackening the seat tube back past 70 degrees. That meant we dropped travel to 120mm (4.7in) after we'd photographed the bike to create a

better synced ride, but we'd be tempted to go as short as 100mm (3.9in) to get a more centred rather than rearward weight distribution.

The easily punctured and floppy-when-soft Continental tyres and wooden, low-powered Tektro Draco 2 brakes do the overall confidence of the bike no favours either. SRAM X5 is nowhere as long lived as the Shimano Deore/SLX alternative, and that can start becoming obvious through the shifters in just a few weeks if you don't keep on top of cable maintenance. You'll need to crank the single-bolt FSA seatpost up super-tight too.

The ride

It didn't take long to establish that the VIRSA's build kit wasn't doing it any favours and we'd struggle to recommend the complete bike. Thankfully the frame is available separately for £349.99, and after some key component changes we're happy to say there's a good heart beating at the centre of the bike. While the main tubes are large in diameter there's no doubt that you're not riding a more rigid alloy bike or a more damped composite frame. While the zing and ping of steel is a cliché, it's one that »



**WHILE THE ZING AND PING OF STEEL IS A CLICHÉ,
IT'S ONE THAT DESCRIBES THE WAY IT SKIMS
AND SPRINGS DOWN THE TRAIL PERFECTLY**

describes the way the Decade VIRSA skims and springs down the trail perfectly. It has a much more dynamic feel than the Surly, spending a lot more time just above the trail than sucking down onto the ground like the softer feeling Karate Monkey.

The 650b wheels skip and skim more than 29in hoops but they accelerate and change direction noticeably faster too. There's still enough meat in the frame to get your

muscle power through to the wheels largely intact and the Kinesis gapped the Onza and Surly easily when it came to squirting out of corners and gaining speed at every opportunity. It's similarly well connected at the front end too, with precise, predictable traction as far as the Continental tyres allow, as long as you hover out of the saddle to get your weight forward.

If you're planning to spec your own build up, it's worth noting that the

handling syncs better with the resilient but rapid ride character the more you drop the front end. The relatively short top tube also makes it a natural home for a longer stem and narrower bar rather than a short and wide enduro-style set-up. »

MBUK

Lively, effervescent, conventional angled steel XC frame at a great price, but complete bike is less convincing



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BOTTLING IT

The YAWYD headset cap lets you crimp your favourite bottle top onto your bike for beverage related personalisation

XC AND I KNOW IT

The ultra-light foam grips and narrow bar are a clue to the unashamedly XC-orientated character of Niner's price-conscious privateer racer

ON A ROLL

Even the rims are Niner branded and the small-volume tyres add easy speed and agile handling to the naturally rapid EMD 9 ride

NINER EMD 9 1-STAR

£1,399

Niner's affordable race bike still has real premium appeal

SO GOOD

Premium looks and well-balanced fast XC ride at an affordable price

Neatly detailed own-brand kit and durable Deore parts

NO GOOD

You can get lighter and better specced bikes from more mainstream brands

Holistic fork, cockpit and tyre choice means adding trail tenacity is a multi-part process

JARGON BUSTER

IS brake mount

Old-style brake mount with bolt holes facing the wheel. Must be used with an adaptor. Superseded by the direct 'post mount'.

Hydroforming

Shaping of tubes by pressing them into moulds/over mandrels using high-pressure hydraulic fluid.

Niner have one of the strongest brand images and swag ranges in the business, and a line-up of eye-wateringly expensive but drop dead gorgeous and achingly aspirational frames costing up to £2,899. The good news is that this complete bike offers their trademark aesthetics and insatiably rapid charisma for less than half that amount.

The frame

Because opinions on how a bike should look differ dramatically between different people we hardly ever comment on aesthetics, but the EMD 9 definitely looks like a top-class chassis. The matt black anodised alloy frame gets red flash highlights and signature statement decals like the "Pedal dammit" slogan on the top tube, and all the fixtures and welds are particularly neat and tidy.

Niner are a bit cagey about butting and other aspects of their 7005 aluminium tubeset but there's plenty of external hydroforming going on to align strength and stiffness in the right places. The narrow chainstays are nipped in at the bottom bracket but there's still plenty of room for bigger rubber than the 2.0in tyres fitted. The

cowled QR dropouts lack the security and stiffness of a through-axle set-up and the rear brake attaches to an IS mount rather than the more modern post mount standard but it's all neatly executed nonetheless. The conventional screw-in bottom bracket offers better guarantees of fitting accuracy and reliability than a press-fit design and the frame has internal routing for a 31.6mm dropper post. Unlike most 29ers it's available in an XS frame size too (though that only has one bottle cage mount).

The kit

If looks are a lot of the immediate appeal of the Niner then the matching component collar and cuffs certainly capitalise on that visual traction. Niner's own 710mm Flat Top bar may sound narrow on paper but it works well with the old-skool racer geometry and logo/red-band matched stem. The ultra-light foam Niner grips are a classic race choice too, and you even get their YAWYD (You Are What You Drink) beer bottle top compatible stem cap included. The seatpost, seat clamp and saddle are similarly matched in appearance. Even the mid-section rims are Niner logoed to complete a

standout synced package. While it's not a custom model the RockShox Recon fork is a naturally good match colour-wise, and the through-axle stiffened ride represents reasonable value for the sub £1,500 price. We've no complaints about the dependably durable Shimano Deore stop and go equipment either, and the fast, narrow WTB tyres are a good choice for a race-focused 29er.

The ride

With its narrow bar and tyres and foam grips, the EMD 9 makes no secret that it's a bike prioritised for XC speed – and that's fine. It's what 29er hardtails are really good at, and if you want something more extreme the steel ROS 9 is a proper slack-and-silly freak. The 710mm bar and 90mm stem are also totally appropriate to the frame angles and tyres. Anything wider would exceed the grip of the WTB rubber too easily and a short stem/big bar combo on top of a steep head angle is a horrible thing to have in your hands. The frame will cope with a 120mm fork (and the geometry will be fine) if you want a bit more travel too.

The EMD 9 backs up its "Pedal dammit" slogan with very

Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS
£1,200-£1,600



**IT'S A BIKE THAT LOVES TO GAIN
AS MUCH SPEED AS POSSIBLE
AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY**

impressive crank to ground connection, and while the wheels aren't light it surges forwards and/or upwards very satisfyingly once you've heaved the first few pedal strokes out of the way. The laterally stiff frame means there's no problem with adding your upper body strength to the propulsion process either, and it's a bike that loves to gain as much speed as possible at every opportunity.

Despite the solid drive feel and low-volume tyres the frame is still

smooth enough to keep revs smooth and traction consistent through rough sections too. It didn't even feel harsh when we were swapping between it and the two big tired, steel framed 29ers here. While there are obvious limits with what an XC geometry, 100mm travel big-wheeler can cope with in terms of size and severity of terrain, the precise frame and fork let you make the best choices for every section of trail (presuming you have the skill). Crucially, the well balanced

package of bar, tyres and geometry also means the whole bike tends to hit its traction and control limits simultaneously and consistently rather than being tripped up by an unexpected or underperforming weak link somewhere in the system. »

MBUK

Really well balanced cross-country/
race 29er with a real premium feel at
a surprisingly affordable price





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Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS
£1,200-£1,600

WORTH THE WAIT

Onza have been working on the Payoff and Jackpot frames for two years and that shows in the innovative detailing and outstanding ride quality

BIG BROTHER

If you want more travel and mid-size wheels the Onza Jackpot uses a similar frame with 150mm Revelation fork and Reverb dropper post for £1,850

DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

The fat-axled Onza crankset maximises power delivery and the press-fit BB30 bottom bracket can be converted into a chain-tensioning singlespeed set-up

ONZA PAYOFF

£1,600

Sweetly detailed big-wheeled trail fun from reborn UK brand

SO GOOD

Outstandingly well balanced, trail blasting ride

Well thought out single-ring spec maximises big ride or big fun versatility

NO GOOD

Aggro riders might be better building up a slacker, grippier bike via Onza's custom programme

Narrow-range cassette is a killer on steep climbs

JARGON BUSTER

Narrow/wide ring
Single chainring that uses alternating thick and thin teeth for extra chain retention security.

Brazing
An old construction method where metal sections are joined with melted brass rather than welded.

If your ears pricked up at the mention of Onza then you've obviously been into biking for a while, but the new Payoff is a great mix of retro-referenced detail and totally modern trail bike with left field appeal at an affordable price.

The frame

Onza's own-brand 'Flawless' tubing is a retro choice designed to deliver a smooth ride without rear suspension. There's an impressive level of detailing right through the frame too. The tapered head tube backs onto the 35mm diameter down tube with extra support from an open-backed throat gusset. The bottom bracket is an oversize PF30 set-up – rare on a steel frame – and there's an eccentric insert in the pipeline to allow simple singlespeed chain adjustment.

The chainstays sprout from a big, forged wishbone bridge box. Their flat-to-round section adds a natural spring effect to the rear end while big, angular 3D dropouts hold replaceable axle inserts set up as 142x12mm as standard. The cantilevered post brake mount leads neatly into top tube routing. The 27.2mm seatpost diameter limits aftermarket dropper

post choice but the long-levered QR clamp is easy to open and close on the fly and the single-bend seat tube means you can drop the saddle right down even without hydraulic help.

Painted Payoff frames are electroplated internally to stop corrosion (raw finish 'Acid Bath' frames aren't) and at £379 are great value if you want to build up your own bike. You're limited to just 17 or 19in sizes but there's a 650b wheeled Jackpot version and the Payoff will take 2.8in 650b+ tyres too.

The kit

The Payoff's Shimano SLX baseline saves weight and slightly improves function and durability over the Deore kit found on other bikes here. Onza provide their own usefully stiff BB30 crankset with 32t narrow/wide ring for a clean and lightweight transmission. Thankfully there's a wider range cassette in the pipeline in case you haven't got the power and determination to grunt the bike up steep hills with its current 11-34t block.

The wheels and Kenda tyres are helpfully light and the RockShox Revelation fork is controlled enough on descents to make it worth earning the

vertical gain. Onza provide the finishing kit, including a well shaped 750mm bar and retro Ules grips. Onza also offer a full custom build programme so you can build your dream bike.

The ride

A dream build is definitely worth considering too, because the more we rode the Payoff, the more we appreciated just what a great frame this is for blasting typical UK trails. Larger diameter frame tubes and the box-backed PF30 bottom bracket mean it's definitely stiffer and easier to hustle up to speed than the Surly. The Slant Six tyres are very fast-rolling too, so once you've heaved it through the first few pedal strokes it accelerates with encouraging responsiveness. Add enthusiastic hop-and-pop responsiveness and we were surprised by how much time we spent at the flat-out end of the gears even on rollercoaster trails.

There's plenty of accurate, clearly communicated trail feedback coming through the grips and pedals but the carefully shaped back end keeps the frame just compliant enough for comfort and consistent connection. It's definitely smoother than an alloy

WE WERE SURPRISED BY HOW MUCH TIME WE
SPENT AT THE FLAT-OUT END OF THE GEARS
EVEN ON ROLLERCOASTER TRAILS



bike over rocky sections, with less sting through your shoes and a spring-and-ping, rather than clatter-and-batter, response to impacts.

If you really want to push on, the tapered head tube will take a 140mm (5.5in) travel fork to slacken things up without pulling the bottom bracket too high or voiding the warranty. The steeper stock head angle does reduce the potential barge effect of the bigger wheels on tight trails though, and

makes the steering less floppy and fussy at slower speeds, particularly on climbs or when you're knackered at the end of an epic exploring day. A more aggressive handling set up would put more load through the relatively slippery front tyre and 120mm fork than they could comfortably handle too, and create a heavier, slower bike for tamer trails.

The Onza is still the most naturally rowdy, 'pop the front wheel, slide the





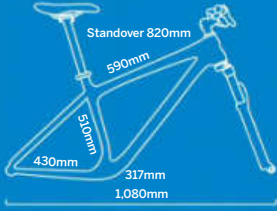
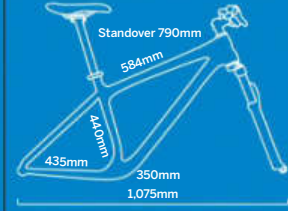
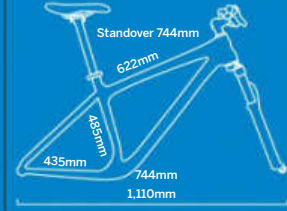

back end, launch that drop, make the most of every metre of trail' bike here by a big slice anyway and the frame-only and custom build options let you wring maximum potential out of this top-quality trail ripper. »

MBUK

Excellent frame delivers tough, trail ready, steel-sprung fun at a cracking price



THE SPEC DECK

				
	SURLY KARATE MONKEY OPS	KINESIS DECADE VIRSA X5	NINER EMD 9 1-STAR	ONZA PAYOFF
PRICE	£1,599.99	£1,199	£1,399	£1,600
DISTRIBUTOR	www.ison-distribution.com	www.kinesisbikes.co.uk	www.jungleproducts.co.uk	www.onza.com
WEIGHT	13.61kg (30lb)	12.86kg (28.35lb)	13.04kg (28.75lb)	13.6kg (29.98lb)
FRAME	Surly Natch double-butted 4130 chromoly steel	Tange Prestige Japan double-butted chromoly steel	7005 aluminium alloy	Onza Flawless double-butted 4130 chromoly steel
SIZES	16, 18, 20 (tested), 22in	16, 18 (tested), 20in	XS, S, M, L (tested), XL	S, M, L (tested)
FORK	Fox 32 Float Evolution, 100mm (3.9in) travel	X-Fusion Sweep RL, 140mm (5.5in) travel	RockShox Recon Silver, 100mm (3.9in) travel	RockShox Revelation Solo Air, 120mm (4.7in) travel
HEADSET	Cane Creek 40	XX44	Internal	FSA internal
WHEELS	Hubs: Shimano Deore, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Alex XD-LITE Spokes: DT Swiss Champion, stainless Wheel weight: 2.25kg F, 2.85kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Kinesis Maxlight IX Disc, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Kinesis Maxlight IX Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 1.96kg F, 2.55kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Niner, 100x15mm F, QR R Rims: Niner Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 2.16kg F, 2.86kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Weinmann XC180 Disc, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Weinmann XC180 Disc Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 2.06kg F, 2.67kg R (including tyres)
TYRES	Maxxis Ardent 29x2.4in	Continental Mountain King 27.5x2.2in	WTB Nine Line TCS 29x2.0in	Kenda Slant Six DTC 29x2.35in
CRANKSET/BOTTOM BRACKET	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/BB70	SRAM X5, 26/39t/GXP	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/BB70	Onza 1, 32t/PF30
DERAILLEURS	Shimano Deore M615	SRAM X5	Shimano Deore M615	Shimano SLX R
SHIFTERS	Shimano Deore M615 (2x10)	SRAM X5 (2x10)	Shimano Deore M615 (2x10)	Shimano SLX R (1x10)
CASSETTE/CHAIN	Shimano HG50, 11-36t/Shimano HG54	SRAM PG-1030/KMC X10	Shimano HG50, 11-36t/Shimano HG54	Shimano HG81, 11-34t/Shimano HG81
BRAKES	Shimano Deore M615, 180/160mm rotors	Tektro Draco 2, 180/160mm	Shimano Deore M447 180/160mm	Shimano Deore M447, 180/160mm
BAR/STEM/Grips	Salsa Salt Flat, 750mm/Surly HL, 90mm/lock-on	Kinesis Strut, 750mm/FSA OS-190, 90mm/WTB WeirWolf	Niner Flat Top Alloy, 710mm/Niner Alloy, 90mm/Niner Grrrips	Onza, 750mm/Onza, 80mm/Onza Ules lock-on
SADDLE/	Kalloy SP-342/Velo VL-2155	FSA SL-280/WTB Volt Sport	Niner alloy/Niner custom	Onza/fi'zi:k Gobi
DIMENSIONS				
FRAME ANGLES	Head 72° Seat 73°	Head 67.5° Seat 69°	Head 72° Seat 74°	Head 69° Seat 73°
VERDICT	MBUK ★★★★★ Super-smooth steel-framed cruiser made for long-haul exploring, not high-speed hammering	MBUK ★★★★★ Lively, effervescent, conventional angled XC frame at a great price, but complete bike is less convincing	MBUK ★★★★★ Really well balanced cross-country/race 29er with a real premium feel at a surprisingly affordable price	MBUK ★★★★★ Excellent frame delivers tough, trail ready, steel-sprung fun at a cracking price

WHAT OUR SCORES MEAN: We give each bike one overall score to sum up how it performs and its value for money. If a bike gets a score of five, it really is the best you can get in terms of both



Poor: simply put, don't bother



Below average: flawed in some way



Good: it'll do the job and do it well



Very good: one of the best you can buy



Exceptional: a genuine class leader



FINAL VERDICT

There are various reasons for companies to offer complete bikes based on successful frames. These range from import tax breaks to just trying to make things convenient for customers, and it's been a successful move for boutique brands such as Santa Cruz, Intense and Nicolai. Our test shows that it's not as simple getting that complete bike right as you might think though.

Unfortunately the Kinesis is the most obvious example of that here. Even if you ignore the fact that the 140mm fork is overkill for the frame and the geometry, the budget SRAM X5 gearing, poor brakes and other parts undermine a potentially great short-travel steel XC frame.

Surly have done a much better job, equipping the Karate Monkey

with kit that supports its super-smooth and steady character. If distance, not dynamic, riding is your bag, then it's definitely worth a look.

If covering distance fast – or just blasting flat out – is more your thing, then Niner's EMD 9 shows how to put a pretty yet practical package together to get the best from a good frame.

The frame is the most important part of any bike, and in this case the Onza is the clear winner in terms of neat detailing and outstanding ride quality that injects solid drive, forgiving control and spring-heeled enthusiasm into every ride. Add a better than average, versatility expanding build, plus well priced frame-only or custom build options, and the Payoff was the unanimous test team favourite.

NEXT MONTH

Affordable hardtails

Best bikes for £600 **ON SALE 13 NOVEMBER**

TRAIL PEDALS

We've given 14 sets of flat and clipless pedals a proper thrashing to help you choose your next set

Words Ric McLaughlin Pics Andy McCandlish

FLAT OR CLIPLESS?

Flat pedals have a level or slightly concave platform with pins attached to provide grip and can be used with trainers or dedicated flat pedal shoes.

Clipless (aka clip-in) pedals have to be used with special shoes with a cleat mounted to the sole. This snaps into a spring-tensioned mechanism within the pedal body, much like a ski binding, for extra security and efficiency.

BODY

Whether you clip in or not, the pedal body is extremely important because it's where you stand and as a result is a key contact point with your bike. It's also often the first point of contact for jagged rocks and roots so it needs to be tough.

SPINDLE

The pedal axle threads into the crank arm and is what the pedal body spins around. It needs to be strong and the metal used (usually steel or titanium) can greatly alter a pedal's overall weight.

BEARINGS/BUSHINGS

These are the machine elements that allow the pedal body to spin on its spindle. A bearing can be ball or needle shaped and sealed or unsealed. Bushings are hard plastic shims that help support your weight evenly.



WE BASE OUR SCORES ON VALUE FOR MONEY AND PERFORMANCE



EXCEPTIONAL:
A genuine class leader



VERY GOOD: One of the best you can buy



GOOD: It'll do the job and do it well



BELOW AVERAGE:
Flawed in some way



POOR: Simply put, don't bother!



THE TESTER

Ric McLaughlin
Ric is based in the Scottish Borders and rides everything from sweeping singletrack to steep, rocky horror trails. He regularly swaps between flats and clips and knows exactly what he's after from a pedal.

What to look for

Are you a flats fan or clipper-inner?

From the humble shopping bike to the World Cup podium placer, every bike needs pedals. In mountain biking there are two camps – flats and clipless.

Basically, do you want to attach your feet to the pedals or not?

Clipless pedals (so-called because they replaced the mildly terrifying concept of shackling your feet in place with old-fashioned buckle-and-strap toe clips) greatly improve pedalling efficiency. They also ensure that on choppy, technical terrain your feet are always in the right position on the pedal, with no risk of being bounced off. If you're new to 'clips' they may seem daunting at first, but after a lap of your local trail practising clipping and unclipping they soon become second nature.

If you're looking for your first pair of clips, consider models offering adjustable entry/release tension – the looser you set them up, the easier it'll be to unclip quickly. If you ride fast and technical terrain then it may also be worth going for a caged design to help protect the mechanism. The small increase in weight will be negligible and the larger platform will help while you get used to clipping in.

Flat pedals have been around a long time and they've evolved to better cater for the demands of hacking about off-road. They need to be strong enough to resist crashes and heavy impacts, yet also offer a good feel. Feel is the key to a good set of flats – you need to know where



your feet are on the pedals, how much grip is on offer and what the bike is doing. On the racing circuit flat pedals were almost a thing of the past until a new breed of Aussie downhill riders appeared, with Chris Kovarik and Sam Hill leading the charge. When coupled with sticky-soled riding shoes such as those from Five Ten, flats became the fashionable option for riders intent on seeking out ever longer drifts and flat-out assaults on treacherous root sections.

Even if you're a dyed-in-the-wool clipper-inner, swapping back to flats for a couple of months can be a fantastic way to correct bad habits and learn new skills. In the deep, sloppy heart of winter when grip is all but impossible to come by, riding flats can be a great way to play with how much traction is available on your favourite trails without the fear of charging shoulder-first into a tree. You'll also be shocked by how much you've come to rely on being clipped in to lift the back end up during hops and jumps.

HOW WE TESTED THEM

IF YOUR BIKE is moving, so are your pedals. They're treated to virtually zero maintenance despite constantly transmitting power to the cranks and helping you shift your weight around on the bike. They also get slammed into immobile lumps of rock and speared into the ground to act as a fulcrum for you and your bike's combined weight during a crash. In short, they take a real pasting.

Does play develop over time? Do the axles remain straight and the bearings smooth? Are red-hot segment times ruined by a bad case of the wobbles as you hunt for the cleat mechanism? Can bent and ground-out pins be removed without needing to reach for a drill? Are there too many or too few pins in the first place? Are you constantly shuffling your feet in search of a more secure footing? Do the platforms bulge to accommodate bearings, resulting in awkward pedalling? The only way to find out is to torture pedals on the trail and see how they deal with it – so that's what we've done.



JARGON BUSTER

> Cleats

Metal fixings that attach to the soles of your shoes if you use clipless pedals so that you can clip into and out of pedal mechanism.

> Body

The platform that you stand on. It takes a beating so needs to be tough, and can vary greatly in size and shape.

> Spindle

A pedal's ability to spin freely and smoothly on its spindle is key. Strength is important too, and spindles contribute greatly to overall weight. Most are made from steel, but titanium saves weight.

> Pins

Both flat and clipless pedals can use pins. These threaded pieces of

metal help keep your feet in place, and their height can sometimes be adjusted to tune the feel.

> Bearings

These ensure the pedal body rotates smoothly around the spindle. They can be either ball or needle type and their quality plays an important part in the longevity of the pedals.

> Bushings

Solid plastic shims that can help reduce impact stresses on bearings.

> Float

Most clipless pedals allow a small amount of lateral movement, which is comfier than having your foot locked in place. Float is the amount, in degrees, your foot can move before disengaging from the pedal.

> Tension

Some clipless pedals offer adjustable tension so you can dial in your perfect entry/release point.

> Concave

Many flat pedal platforms are lower in the centre than at the edges. This improves feel and control because your foot sits in the hollow, allowing for slightly more grip.



WEIGHT: 522g (pair)

Funn Mamba

£119.99 Decade Europe www.decadeurope.com

THE MAMBAS ARE big, very big! And for their intended purpose of everything from enduro to downhill that's no bad thing – there's always a platform to get your feet back onto. They're compatible with Shimano SPD cleats, which makes replacements easy to find. They also feature Funn's Grease Renew System, which makes purging old grease for fresh stuff straightforward – just as well, considering that their

price puts them in the long-term investment bracket. At 522g they're not the lightest, and riders with smaller feet may find them too much pedal. We didn't like the pins' lack of height adjustment either, which can make clipping in and out with wider, stickier soled shoes trickier than need be. Unusually, the Mambas come in a single-sided version too.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 477g

HT X1

£119.99 Ison Distribution www.isondistribution.co.uk

RACE FANS MAY recognise the X1s from Aaron Gwin's bike – the 2015 Downhill World Cup champ helped develop them. At 477g for the pair, they're light for platform style, alloy bodied clipless pedals. We had to do some initial set-up work – the pins needed lowering into the bodies slightly and we ended up backing the tension right off to its minimum setting – but this made getting into and out of

the pedals a lot easier. It's nice to know that the adjustment is there if needed but they may be a touch too tight for first-timers. The engagement is on the snappy side and even after repeated muddy push-up runs with our shoes' cleat beds clogged with slop they clicked into place nicely. The price is on the steep side though.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 385g

Time ATAC MX6

£79.99 Extra UK www.extrauk.co.uk

TIME'S ATAC MX6 pedals have a mid-sized plastic body specially designed to shed mud and shrug off nasty rock slides, both of which they do a good job of. The engagement is more of a 'clunk' than a 'click' and can take a while to get used to but is solid once you're there. The pedal feel is a sort of halfway house between a locked-in Shimano SPD feel and a floaty CrankBrothers one, and Time's SENSOR adjustment

system helps you dial it in to your liking. Time's cleats let the side down a bit though – they're fixed-position, with no lateral adjustment available once on the shoe. There's enough of a platform to get a foot onto in emergencies and, despite the reassurance of solid steel axles, the ATAC MX6s weigh in at a more than reasonable 385g.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 576g

Shimano M647

£74.99 Madison www.madison.co.uk

THEY MAY BE growing a bit long in the tooth now but Shimano's long-running 'DX' clipless pedals are still among the very best. The SPD cleat/pedal interface is one of the most intuitive to use and tension is easily adjusted via a 3mm Allen bolt at the back of the pedal. Although unglamorous, the big grey plastic body dissipates impacts nicely and glances off more stubborn outcrops as opposed to digging in.

The 576g weight is the main drawback of these pedals, but a newer version is in the final stages of testing on select Shimano World Cup pros' bikes that should address that. Until then, for under £75 and with cleats available in just about any bike shop in the world, the trusty M647s are a proper slice of big bike value.

MBUK ★★★★★

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WEIGHT: 298g

One23 W-01

£47.99 Today's Cyclist www.todayscyclist.co.uk

THE BRAND NAME may be new to you but One23 are an offshoot of Wellgo, and as such have plenty of pedigree when it comes to making cost-effective pedals. The W-01s' diminutive size and skimpy 298g weight make them ideal for the gram-conscious rider on a budget. You don't get any protection for the pedal mechanism, but even when things get a bit blurry and an emergency dab is needed, their

Shimano-like engagement is intuitive. It's only when you just want to hover a foot over the pedal that their smaller size lets them down. The Shimano comparisons continue with the cleats, which are all but identical, making replacements readily available. The tension is adjustable and an even cheaper version is available without this facility.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 480g

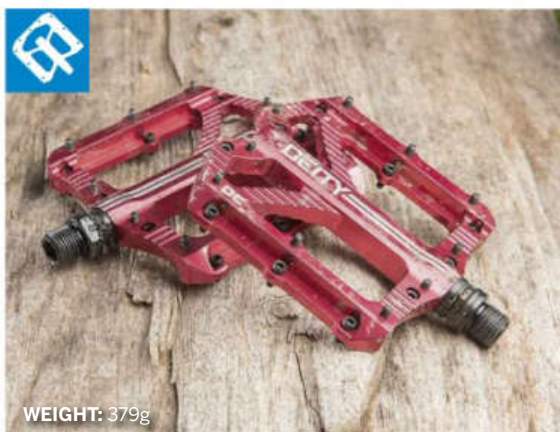
CrankBrothers Mallet DH/Race

£124.99 Extra UK www.extra-uk.com

AS THE NAME suggests, the Mallet DH/Races from CrankBrothers have a fair bit of sporting pedigree and can be seen on the race rigs of some of downhill's biggest names. That said, their aggressive attributes make them a good choice for enduro machinery too. At 480g the weight is decent for such a big set of pedals but where they really come into their own is in the slop. CrankBrothers' rotating mechanism provides four

– rather than the usual two – surfaces to clip into and the open spaces between the cage and mechanism mean they shed mud well. We like the adjustable height pins and tough alloy body too, and we've had no issues with durability after months of abuse. These are top performing pedals with a lot of racing kudos.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 379g

Deity Bladerunner

£89.99 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

ARE THEY REPLICANTS, are they not replicants?! No, they're pedals. The Bladerunners are the largest platform pedals Deity have ever made and yet are the lightest flats on test at just 379g. Unlike the other flats here, they have a slightly convex (rather than concave) feel, with the leading and trailing edges sitting marginally lower than the centre. As a result, it can feel like you're standing on the flat, pinless axle

area, though you can adjust the feel with the two provided pin lengths. There's virtually no excess meat on the CNC machined alloy body, which along with the triple-sealed bearings adds a touch of class. The home mechanic in us appreciated the fact that they can be attached or removed using either an 8mm Allen key or a traditional pedal spanner.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 395g

NS Bikes Radiance

£89.99 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

THE RADIANCE PEDALS from NS have been born from the brand's love of freeride and all things sideways and fun-orientated. They're light at just 395g and have a svelte, smooth look and finish that helps justify their lower-end-of-premium price tag. The 103mm wide 6061-T6 aluminium body is extremely comfortable and 11 4.5mm pins per side help keep your feet in place. They're a universal

Allen head fitment too, which makes sourcing replacements easy should you need them. The bodies spin on a pair of sealed bearings and bushings per pedal, which ensured they stayed smooth even after months of abuse. The Radiances are accomplished all-round performers and represent good value for those tired of replacing cheaper pedals.

MBUK ★★★★★

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WEIGHT: 434g

Specialized Bennies

£60 Specialized www.specialized.com

THE BENNIES FROM Specialized are a solid pair of flat pedals developed in-house by their resident long-haired American pro, Brad Benedict. They offer up a generous 2.7mm concave drop between their edges and centre, and with 12 shoe-grabbing pins per side, the overall feel is extremely secure. Those pins are well placed so that you can add or remove them to adjust the feel. At 100mm wide, the

platforms aren't quite as broad as on some downhill-specific pedals, but that's not to say they're not more than up for a thumping. The tough alloy bodies and sealed cartridge bearings keep them spinning straight and smooth, while chunky chromoly steel axles gobble up the hits. At 434g, they're pretty much bang on weight wise too.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 432g

Nukeproof Neutron

£54.99 Hotlines www.hotlines-uk.com

ASK RIDERS OF a certain generation why they ride flat pedals and time and time again one name will be trotted out – Sam Hill. The Neutrons once graced the Australian star's Nukeproof Pulse downhill bike, so they've got some serious pedigree. For this money, they're a superb package of shape, feel and sturdiness. At 432g they're lighter than some pedals nearly double their price and with

10 pins per side, they're more than grippy enough. At 98x99mm their size is on the slightly more compact side compared to some of the bigger boys, but not by much. If you're feeling flush then Nukeproof also offer the Neutrons with lighter titanium axles and magnesium bodies, but be warned that they don't come cheap.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 450g

Burgtec Penthouse MK4

£99.99 Burgtec www.burgtec.co.uk

THE WORD 'ARTISAN' conjures up images of goat's cheese sourced from smug organic farmers' markets, but in mountain biking terms it means tough-as-nails pedals from Burgtec. Produced in limited batches in a machine shop near deepest, darkest Stoke by blokes in boiler suits, the Penthouse Flats have long been the preserve of downhillers not much minded to mess about. Now in their fourth incarnation, you get a

comfy 1mm concave platform and meaty, adjustable-height steel pins. Each pair is hand assembled by the company's owners, Dave and Dan. At 450g they're not the lightest but the chunky alloy body, long-lasting bearings and no-nonsense approach make them some of the toughest. If you really want to splash the cash, a titanium axle upgrade is available.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 491g

Shimano Saint MX80

£59.99 Madison www.madison.co.uk

SHIMANO'S TAKE ON the flat pedal was always going to be a seriously focused affair and straight from the wrappers there's a distinctly racy, sophisticated feel about the MX80s. We found the standard pin setting to be slightly on the short side but simply remove the pins, drop out their washers, reinsert and you're laughing. The fact that the pins screw in from the back means that if you grind

them down off some granite they're a doddle to swap out. The platform size is just right – not too big, not too small – and the slightly concave shape is comfy right from the off. At 491g the Shimanos are fairly chunky but the quality build and feel make up for it. Race focused and reliable, these are serious flat pedals.

MBUK ★★★★★

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WINNERS

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WEIGHT: 407g

Shimano Deore XT M785 Trail

£79.99 Madison www.madison.co.uk

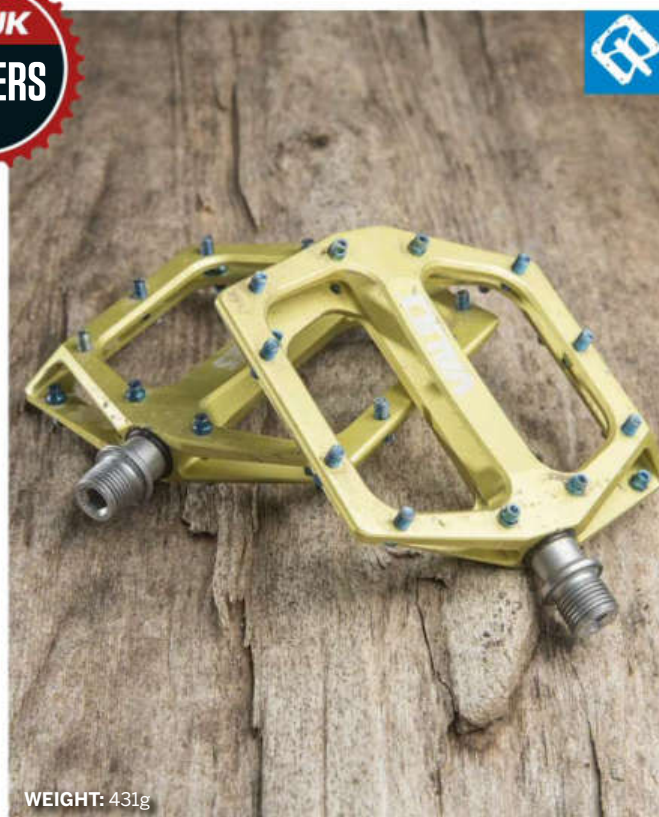
SHIMANO'S CAGED 'TRAIL' design has been around for a few years now and it's a firm favourite. The SPD mechanism is protected from rocks and crashes by an alloy body and when everything gets a bit spicy you have a bit more pedal to get your foot onto. The cage's benefits are so great that you'd have to be a weight weenie racer to opt for the unprotected M780 Race version. You can go a lot cheaper (M530) or a lot pricier (XTR M9020 Trail) in the Shimano family but all you're really bargaining over is a few grams, making the M785 Trails pretty much the perfect balance at 407g.

The body sheds mud effortlessly and you'll be able to clip in even in winter's most clay-like gloop. Engagement is the trademark Shimano 'click',

which is intuitive and reliable, great for beginners and experienced clipless pilots alike. The tension adjustment mechanism is incredibly hardy and easily tweaked with a 3mm Allen key.

The secret to our love for the Shimano XT Trails is their longevity though. The build quality is superb and we have several pairs on their second or third bike without a trace of play. Even after years of being shot-blasted with grit and slime before being basted in aggressive cleaning agents and blasted clean again, they always come up ready for more. There simply isn't another set of pedals that can match them as a long-lasting investment in performance and durability.

MBUK ★★★★★



WEIGHT: 431g

DMR Vault

£99.99 Upgrade Bikes www.upgradebikes.co.uk

UK-BASED DMR effectively spawned the hard-hitting mountain bike flat pedal with their original V12s back in the 1990s, and the Vaults are a continuation of that lineage. Weighing in at 431g, they have 11 adjustable pins per side. The platforms are large in size without being barge-like so they're ideal for taller riders and for big bike use. Even when things get squirrely, no matter what angle your foot goes onto the pedal there's plenty of surface area to grip onto. They work well with today's ultra-low bottom bracket heights too thanks to their low-profile design, which makes clipping the deck less likely. There's a wide range of colours to choose from and even a couple of pro signature models from sponsored riders Brendan

Fairclough and Andreu Lacondeguy. The fact that those two riders sit at the top of the DH and freeride worlds more than attests to the Vaults' gravity credentials. That said, their weight makes them a great option for the trail rider intent on hanging the back end out on a Sunday afternoon as well. The Vaults do what DMR's top models have always done – they're tough yet smooth. They're not cheap, but if you're a dedicated flat pedal rider then they'll comfortably outlast the vast majority of the competition and are fully worth the investment. Magnesium bodies and titanium axles are available too, if you want to lose some weight and can stomach the extra outlay.

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MBUK Manual

THE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & PLACES TO
GO FOR A BETTER RIDE



P136 **HOW TO...**

THE FUNDAMENTALS #5 TECHNICAL TRAILS

How and when to use bunnyhops and manuals to maintain your flow on steep and natural terrain



P152 **WRECKING CREW**

HADLEIGH PARK

We check out Essex's finest – the Olympic XC track, now open to mere mortals

P142 **GRIMETIME**



Got a creak or play in your headset? Here's a step-by-step guide to replacing it



P144 **ASK MBUK**

Your questions, our answers, all of your mechanical problems solved



P146 **THE BIG RIDE**

We explore the remote natural and built trails around Nant yr Arian in Mid Wales

MBUK'S ROUTE EXPERT



All our route maps are put together by route guru **Max Darkins**. Max loves travelling the country in search of the best trails and is also the man behind **www.roughrideguide.co.uk**

The Fundamentals MASTER TECHNICAL TRAILS

Think manuals and bunnyhops are just car park stunts? You need to nail them to excel on steep natural terrain

In part two of this series (MBUK 319) we covered some core skills that can seem a bit redundant when it comes to riding fast and flowing trail centres, and more like stunts to pull in the car park to impress your mates. But on technical and natural trails, it's these techniques such as bunnyhops and manuals that are the foundations of flow, along with maintaining a balanced body position. If you can pop

the front wheel up, for example, it makes it easier to negotiate slow drops and get over slippery roots.

Many of the skills covered in this final part of the series are the same as the core skills, with slight adaptations and a little bit of added timing. Match a core skill to a feature on the trail and you'll understand what you need to do to ride it better, and have the confidence to tackle most trail obstacles. »

**ABOUT
PRO RIDE**

Pro Ride teach skills training sessions in the UK. The team are headed up by Joe Rafferty, who has 10 years' coaching experience. Elite riders and skilled coaches Ben Deakin and Joe Flanagan are also part of the crew, as are enduro racers Phil and Sam Shucksmith. www.proridemtb.com

>>

STEEP SWITCHBACKS

A switchback is a tight and often steep turn that requires good line choice and speed control if you want to keep your flow. They're mostly found in the Alps or anywhere you ride ancient footpaths – the good stuff! The same basics to making a good turn covered in part three of this series (*MBUK 320*) still apply – speed, lean, body position and line. Because the turn is tight, you'll need little speed and lots of lean!

1 SET UP

All of your forward energy needs to be turned around, so slow down to a speed at which you know you'll be able to change direction and roll out smoothly. Enter the turn on a wide line so you have more room to manoeuvre.

2 TURN

Get your chest low so your arms are bent and you have room to lean the bike over. Hanging off the back of the bike with straight arms will make it impossible to lean and turn the bike. Turn your hips and head to face the exit, drop your outside foot and lean the bike into the turn.



STEEP TERRAIN

Staying in control on steep terrain can be tricky – it's a struggle between gravity trying to speed you up and your brakes trying to slow you down. Practise going slow on short steep sections that you'd usually use speed to get through, then you'll be fine when it comes to longer, tougher and steeper sections.



GRIP Maintaining grip is important because if you lose it you'll accelerate out of control. Try not to let your tyres skid, unless it's a controlled skid. To control a skid you have to feel what's going on underneath your wheels and modulate the front and rear brakes.



LINE Always aim to avoid features that'll cause you to lose grip, such as diagonal roots, marble-like gravel and slippery rocks. If you have to cross a slippery obstacle, make sure you unweight your bike over it.



4 EXIT SPEED

Your focus should be on exiting as smoothly and fast as possible so you have speed for the section that follows. Commit to your line and if you've had to drag the brakes, let them off as you straighten up.

3 BRAKING

It's best to do all of your braking before the turn, then let the brakes off so you can focus on leaning the bike and getting grip. If the corner is very steep it's not always possible to let go of the brakes, so instead drag them to control your speed and let off the front brake just before you turn so you can find grip.



ENDO TURN

If a turn is very tight then you can lift the rear wheel by applying the front brake and moving your body forwards, then use a quick shift of your hips to pivot the bike around on the front wheel. Definitely practise this on the flat first before attempting it on a steep corner!



BALANCE

At slow speeds you have to use your body position to balance. Being able to trackstand means you can slow right down and check a line out before committing. To practise this, ride as slowly as you can and come to a complete stop. Keep your pedals level and stay balanced by letting off the brakes or counter-steering.



BODY POSITION

It's important that you lower your chest and bend your elbows. If you have straight arms and your front wheel slips to the side, you're going straight after it. Get your heels down and support your weight with your legs. Leaning on/hanging off the bar when braking will have you on the deck before you know it.

SLOW DROPS

On natural trails you'll often come around a corner and find a drop that you don't have the speed to clear. You'll need to pop that front wheel and hold it up to avoid going over the bars. Practise wheelieing and manoulling off small drops at slow speeds and you'll have it covered next time.



If in doubt, push it out – as your front wheel reaches the edge of the drop, use your arms and feet to push the bike forwards and drop your hips to unweight the front wheel. Try to hold the front wheel out in front until your rear wheel drops off the edge.

>>

STEP-UPS

The key with rock steps is to commit and get up onto the top without coming to a dead stop and smashing your pedals or chainring into the rock. Here we're using an uphill step that's unridable without a little hop to get up on it. Practising the core skills of wheelieing and bunnyhopping on the flat will help you master step-ups. If you have your bunnyhop dialled you can also use this on downhill or flat trails to get onto ledges or rocks that would otherwise slow you down.

1 APPROACH

Select a slightly higher gear than you're already riding in, so you can use your power to pop the front wheel up, just like with the wheelie we covered back in part two (MBUK 319). You'll need to judge your pedal revolutions so you're ready to put the power down just before the step-up. Keep your speed up into the section so you don't stall and lose balance.



ROCK GARDENS

When tackling rock gardens, the first thing you need to do is choose a line that you know you can ride, then look at the features that are going to affect you. Rattling through a small rock garden with a good body position is easy, but when the rocks are bigger it's a quick combination of moves at the correct time that'll see you through safely. Look for the following features in the rock garden, then make sure you have the individual skills dialled before trying them as a combo.



SLAB A steep, and often fairly smooth, piece of rock that you'll need to keep your grip and control on. Practise riding steep sections at slow speeds.



CAMBER This is when you're riding across the angle of a slope. Move your hips to the outside, and it's better to approach with more speed than less.



STEP-UPS A ledge or rock edge that you'll have to lift your front wheel onto with a small manual so you don't stall or go over the bars.



SMALL DROP Any edge where your front wheel is going to drop and dig in if you don't pop it up. See 'Slow drops' on page 139.



3 RIDE OUT

You may have to scoop your rear wheel up using a rear wheel lift if it's going to hook up on the edge. As soon as you're up on top it's important to pedal to get back the speed you've lost.

2 POP

Pop your front wheel up onto the ledge using a small wheelie. Do this by compressing your fork just before the edge, then powering your cranks down from the 12 o'clock position. As soon as your front wheel touches down, stand up tall and shift your hips towards your bar to unweight your rear wheel.

ROOT SECTIONS

A bad experience on roots can leave you feeling nervous and make you stiffen up every time you approach a rooty bit of trail. Some root sections are impossible to master, but most are just a bit of a mind game. Always look where you want to go – forwards!



SQUARE UP Always hit large single roots – or the majority of roots in a cluster – square on. Be confident that speed will get you over a big clump of roots.



LIGHT FRONT On single roots, unweight the front wheel by doing a manual. Once the front wheel is through, the rear will generally follow.



UNWEIGHT On small root sections, unweight both wheels by doing front and rear wheel lifts. Don't do this if you'll land on another root, because you'll slip.



STAY LOOSE Relax and try to keep your weight through your feet. Don't make big, aggressive movements and if you have to turn make it gradual.



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DIFFICULTY



REPLACE YOUR HEADSET

TIME 40 minutes

COST £Varies

If your headset's creaking or wobbling and beyond repair, follow this step-by-step guide to swap it for a new one.



01 Ensure your bike is clean and clamp it securely in a workstand. Remove the front wheel. Undo the bolts securing the front brake lever to the handlebar, turning them anticlockwise with the appropriate tool. Put the bolts and lever clamp somewhere clean and safe. Allow the lever body to hang down by the fork.



02 Now remove the rest of the controls – shifter(s), rear brake lever, dropper post lever – from the bar, using the appropriate Allen and/or Torx keys and turning them anticlockwise. If the controls have split clamps, undo the bolts and pull the controls off. If they have fixed clamps, loosen the bolts, remove the grips and then slide the controls off the bar.



06 Use the appropriate headset removal tool to remove the lower headset cup – for tapered steerers, you'll need a different tool for the lower and upper cups because they'll be different sizes. Pull the tool up through the head tube with the barbs pointing downwards until the barbs pop out into the head tube.



07 Push the headset removal tool back down firmly until the barbs all sit flush on the rim of the lower headset cup. Look to make sure all three barbs are properly seated on the outer edge of the cup – they can sometimes get caught on the head tube, which can cause damage to the frame.



08 Hold the headset removal tool with one hand so that the handle is centred within the upper headset cup. Give the top of the tool a firm vertical tap with a rubber mallet. Check that the tool is still properly sitting on the lower headset cup before hitting it again. Repeat until the lower cup falls out of the head tube.



12 Turn the handle clockwise, ensuring that the tool is kept squarely in line with the head tube. Continue to turn the handle until the lower headset cup is fully installed in the frame and there's no gap between the cup and the head tube. This shouldn't take much force. Return the bike to the correct way up and repeat steps 11 and 12 with the upper headset cup.



13 Grease the inside of the headset cups and install the new bearings. Clean the fork's steerer tube, check the crown race is correct for the headset, then slide the steerer into the head tube. Add the upper race, seals, bearing cover and spacers. Slide the stem on, replace any other spacers and reinstall the top cap, turning the bolt clockwise to the recommended torque setting.



14 Refit the controls (and grips, if removed) to the bar in a reversal of steps 1 and 2, taking care to fit them in the correct order and only doing the bolts up loosely. Remove the bike from the workstand and check the controls are in the most ergonomic position possible before tightening the clamp bolts clockwise until snug.



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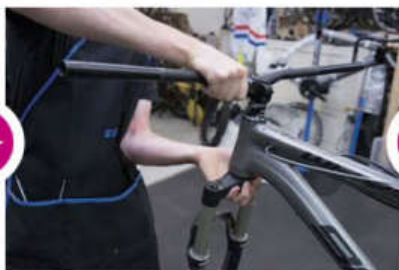


Tools for the job Essential kit

- 1 Headset press
- 2 Headset removal tool(s)
- 3 Grease
- 4 Degreaser
- 5 Rubber mallet
- 6 Torque wrench
- 7 Allen key set (plus Torx keys if needed to remove controls)
- 8 Ziptie
- Not pictured
- 9 Cleaning rags



03 With the rest of the controls removed from the bar, gently pull them back and secure them to the top tube with a ziptie so they're out of the way.



04 Loosen the stem's steerer clamp bolts, turning them a few turns anticlockwise with the appropriate size Allen key. Hold the fork in one hand and use the appropriate size Allen key to remove the stem's top cap bolt, turning it anticlockwise. Set the bolt, top cap and any spacers aside, in order. Pull the stem off the steerer tube, then set the bar and stem aside.



05 Set any headset spacers below the stem aside with the others. Slide the fork out of the frame and set it aside. Remove the headset's top bearing cover, upper race and seals. Put them next to the spacers, in the correct order. Pick out the headset bearings with your fingers (they may be loose balls or cartridge bearings) and set them aside, or discard them if pitted.



09 If your workstand allows, turn the bike upside down. Repeat steps 6 to 8 on the upper headset cup, using the correct size headset removal tool. Discard the old headset cups.



10 Use degreaser and rags to clean the inside of the head tube thoroughly. Inspect it for cracks or signs of damage. If everything's OK, grease the inside of the head tube liberally and apply grease to the outside of the new headset cups too.



11 Wind the handle of the headset press almost fully anticlockwise. Slide the new lower headset cup over the shaft along with the appropriate adaptor to press it in. Thread the shaft of the tool down through the head tube until the headset cup sits on the end of the head tube. Slide the lower plate up the shaft of the tool and clip it onto the highest notch you can.



15 Align the stem with the front tyre and the bar with the dials on the fork crown – this will ensure the bar is straight. To make adjustments, hold the bar while tapping the wheel with one foot. Once straight, tighten the stem's steerer clamp bolts, turning them clockwise to the manufacturer's recommended torque setting.



16 Pull the front brake lever with one hand and use the other to rock the frame back and forth while feeling for play between the frame and headset. If there is play, loosen the stem clamp bolts (anticlockwise), tighten the steerer bolt (clockwise), straighten the bar and retighten the stem clamp bolts (clockwise).

WORKSHOP WISDOM

We know what you're thinking. Yes, it's possible to replace a headset without the proper tools, but no, we don't recommend going down this route. Whether you're taking out an old headset without a headset removal tool or installing a new one without a press, it's all too easy to damage the head tube, ruining the

frame. The new headset may be damaged too, or just wear out faster due to poor installation. Headset presses are expensive, so it's worth getting to know your local bike shop – many will let those who know what they're doing use their tools. Alternatively, find a mate with headset woes and go halves on buying the right tools.



MBUK

YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED BY OUR EXPERTS



Alpinestars' armour is light and well ventilated

Q I've worked my way steadily up the bike ladder and now own a 2014 Whyte 905. On holiday in France I had my first taste of downhill. I enjoyed it so much that I'm not sure whether I should keep my Whyte and hire a full-sus when I need one or sell up and invest in a tough enduro bike. Any advice?

Nick Box, Leeds



Whyte's 905 is a cracking hardtail, but rear suspension helps in the mountains

A We're massive fans of the Whyte 905 – it's a very capable bike. That said, a solid full-suspension trail bike can both elevate your riding and open up new locations to ride in. You need to think hard about the sort of riding you do though. If most of it's hardtail friendly and you're only likely to do the odd trip to the Alps, it may be hard to justify the outlay on a full-sus. But if you're

happy to sacrifice some of that hardtail efficiency for a bit of rear end squish and you've got the cash, then there are plenty of decent bikes available for upwards of £1,000. We've been getting on well with the Vitus Sommet (though in its pricier VRX guise). For £1,799.99 the frame and components are sorted, and, most importantly, it'll take a pasting when you need it to. ☘



QUICK FIX MOUNTAIN BIKE TIPS

How to tidy up frayed inner gear cables



01 Use a sharp pair of cable cutters to snip the worst of the frayed inner gear cable off, ensuring that you still have at least 30mm of free cable protruding from the mech's anchor bolt.



02 Take a pair of pliers and use them to grip the cable from the top. Twist the pliers in a clockwise direction while pulling the cable taut to tidy the frayed end up as much as possible.



03 Carefully slot a cable end cap over the end of the cable, twisting it in a clockwise direction as you go to prevent the cable fraying again. Use your pliers to carefully put two crimps in the end cap to secure it to the cable.



CONTACT US:

Write to: Ask MBUK, 2nd Floor, Tower House, Fairfax Street, Bristol
Email: askmbuk@bikeradar.com Visit: www.mbuk.com

Q I'm looking to get some well-ventilated upper body armour for racing enduro. I currently use O'Neal's STV Protector Shirt, which is great for the most part but very hot when climbing. I've been looking at the TiDP Control Suit, thinking that because the armour isn't stitched into a top it may allow more airflow.

Mike Gordon, via email

A Unfortunately, being a touch sweaty is the price you pay for being protected. We've no experience with the Control Suit but it does look like it should be a little less clammy. We've always got on well with Alpinestars armour. If you're looking for loads of protection, their Bionic Jacket is great and made from breathable mesh. It does cost £209.99 though. Alternatively, the Evolution jacket is a little less bulky and lighter, uses mesh panels unlike the O'Neal jacket and costs £144.99.

Q Where can I find service instructions for a Marzocchi 350 R fork? I've tried everywhere! Would it kill companies to put instructions on paper? You can't fix bikes with a laptop.

Neil Sutton, via email

A Very true, Neil! We have a Grimec time in the pipeline for this sort of thing but it's still a few months off, so if you need to get cracking your best bet is to contact Windwave, Marzocchi's UK distributors. Fire an email to workshop@windwave.co.uk or give them a call on 023 9250 5322.

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Trek Superfly 7 2016

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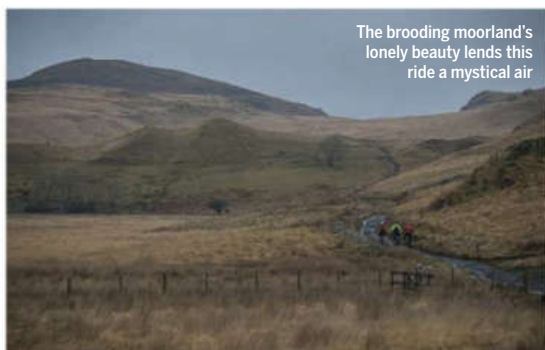
**HEADING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK REVEALS THERE'S MORE TO
THIS TRAIL HUB THAN WAYMARKED ROUTES AND RED KITES**

Words Max Darkins **Pics** Andy Lloyd





It's not all peat bogs – you'll encounter all types of terrain, and likely some inclement weather too



The brooding moorland's lonely beauty lends this ride a mystical air



If you want a big, remote ride, then Mid Wales has a lot to offer. My co-pilot/photographer Andy Lloyd and I eventually arrive, late, at the Nant yr Arian forest visitor centre. Waiting and raring to go are Neil Delafield, who runs Red Kite Events and the local Mondraker Enduro Series, and Peter Lloyd, a super-keen and skilled rider for Whyte Bikes. After four hours on the road we're not going anywhere just yet – the cafe is calling.

What with the rain (what else would you expect in Wales?) and the late start, I break the news that we may have to take some shortcuts on our route, which combines rugged natural riding with the superb 35km black-graded Syfydrin trail, a mix of manmade singletrack and natural, technical doubletrack. It's pretty wild, exposed and tough going, so

you need to be well equipped and experienced to take it on. Oh, and good weather helps too.

Heading off up the hill our legs are well warmed up by the time we're onto 'The Italian Job', a fast flowing trail that raises our spirits despite the falling rain. Neil shows us a couple of nice alternative sections of singletrack off it. With time already running away from us we get back on track, leaving the outward-bound trail to join the return leg on 'Drunken Druid'.

Onto the moors

We're not bailing out yet though, but heading out across the moors. Although full of puddles, the trail is well used to this kind of weather and still very rideable. Peter feels the need to manual it, saying that this reduces drag by 50 per cent. I guess he has a point. We continue over a minor road and

THE LOWDOWN

NANT YR ARIAN, WALES



Nant yr Arian is in Mid Wales, 10 miles east of Aberystwyth. There are three waymarked trails, but it's the option of including rough, rugged and remote natural trails that makes the riding so special.
www.visitwales.com

WE CAN SEE THE VAST EMPTY AREA WE NEED TO COVER TO GET BACK, STARTING WITH A DESOLATE MOORLAND CROSSING



The route is sprinkled with
superlative singletrack



ford, and after a short but technical descent with serious consequences off to the side, a short, steep climb brings us to some tarmac. We join this road, which leads us to the Nant-y-Moch reservoir, and decide to miss out the Esgair Gorddi singletrack due to the bad conditions. We cross the dam and skirt the reservoir before climbing on a forest track.

A slippery, slithery trail leads us out of the trees to a fun mix of rock and ruts across the moor by Pen Cerrig, then we rejoin the Syfydrin trail back down to the reservoir. We're soon leaving it again though as we climb through the shelter of the trees on the trail we'll be returning on later in the day. After a technical, rocky ascent we snake our way down a rutted track to a big, wide-open track crossing by some mine workings. We turn left here, rejoining the planned route,

and climb past old mineshafts. Another left has us following the fence line down the hill to a rocky track past the ruin of a farmhouse, though all eyes are firmly fixed on the trail ahead as we bounce down the hillside.

As I pause at the lakeside I hear a thunderous roar. I'm half expecting the sky to fall, but it's a military aircraft skimming along the hilltops. It's time for us to make our way back up the hill we just descended, so we drag ourselves up past the mineshafts. Hanging a left, we head up into the forest, winding our way past some lakes and the remote Angler's Retreat building, for a final effort to the most northerly part of our ride.

Wet and wild

From here we're able to see the vast empty area we've crossed, and the vast empty area we now need to cover to get back again, starting with a desolate

WHAT IS VIEWRANGER?



ViewRanger is an app that lets outdoor enthusiasts discover, plan, navigate and share their adventures on smartphones, on tablets and online. With offline mapping (including Ordnance Survey maps), turn-by-turn navigation and bike computer functions like ride time, ride distance and current, average and maximum speed, it'll turn your phone into a fully fledged GPS unit.

You can also use it to plan or download routes, access guidebook-style information, broadcast your location and track your friends. It has a social platform too, where you can store and share their adventures.

ViewRanger is used by more than 400 official bodies, including search-and-rescue teams in the UK and overseas.



The ViewRanger app is available to download for Apple, Android, Blackberry 10, Kindle Fire and Symbian devices.



BE PREPARED

This is an exposed and remote mountain route, so be sure to carry sufficient food, clothing, spares and tools

moorland crossing. We descend past Hafodwnog Farm and continue out onto the moors on singletrack that seems to have gouged a line into the ground. It widens to reveal a fun stony trail amid the otherwise boggy, peaty land. Considering the rainfall, I have to keep checking over my shoulder to ensure a tidal wave of water isn't chasing us down the hill *Lord of the Rings* style. It's an exhilarating trail though and we feel a million miles from anything.

Swallowed whole

We're brought back to reality with a thump, quite literally, when Neil's wheel disappears into a 'deeper than it looks' puddle just before we reach the gate back into the forest. It's a sober reminder of how vulnerable we are out here.

At the next ford we plough on through at speed, having long stopped worrying about getting wet feet, and the water parts in two huge waves, straight into my shoes. We retrace our steps from the wide track crossing, up the deep, wiggly

water-worn bridleway and back down the rocky descent. Peter shows us all up and how to leap and land safely on wet rocks, simultaneously taking out a photographer. Impressive. With nothing broken, yet, we quit while we're ahead and rejoin the Syfydrin trail near the reservoir, taking in the bumpy, rocky descent of Esgair Ffosfudr.

At the bottom, with the daylight quickly running out, we decide to take a shortcut. It's a shame to miss the wild and rugged trails to Bont-goch but we've still got some great singletrack to enjoy, which we join around the back of Llyn Syfydrin, at post 38, on the Syfydrin trail once more.

We finish on the excellent 'High as a Kite' run down to the visitor centre. There's not a soul around, in fact we haven't seen anyone since we left this morning. At least the bike wash is still in service and it doubles as a power shower. Thankfully civilisation isn't that far away now, and we're soon ensconced in a cosy pub, warming our toes. Who needs remoteness? 🍷

🍴 BEST EATING 1



The Bwlch Nant yr Arian Forest Visitor Centre has a nice cafe, and is the only place to buy food on the entire route. There's seating inside and out, offering wonderful views over the pond and wildlife below, especially during the red kite feeding sessions at 2pm in the winter and 3pm in the summer. It's open all week from 10am to 5pm, but hot food is only served until 3pm. The Druid Inn in Goginan, a lovely village pub less than three miles away on the A44 to Aberystwyth, serves good food and real ales.

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Several reports suggest that people can train for longer and have increased power output after drinking caffeine, which means a cup of coffee can help you get more out of your next ride!

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A report by elite fitness trainer Parker Cote published in *Men's Health* suggests a cup of coffee before exercise decreases muscle pain, which means you can pedal faster for longer.

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THE LOWDOWN

HADLEIGH PARK, ESSEX



DISTANCE: 5KM PER LAP (RED TRAIL)

CLIMBING: 170M PER LAP

TIME: 20 MINUTES PER LAP

GRADING: BEGINNER TO
ADVANCED XC TRAILS

WHY RIDE HERE?

Hadleigh Park carries the London 2012 Olympic legacy on its shoulders – ride here and feel like an elite athlete!

RAD...

- Well planned and built cross-country trails
- Easily accessible
- Good facilities

BAD...

- Not much variety on track
- Slippery death-gravel
- Joey Essex

WRECKING Mountain Biking^{UK} CREW

Hadleigh Park, Essex

We slap on the fake tan and head to the Olympic XC track – and find more than we'd bargained for

Words Alex Evans Pics Steve Behr



For many, Essex is synonymous with garish cars, fake tan and the man-make-up sporting Joey Essex. Happily, the only obsession with looks that Hadleigh Park shares with its orange-skinned TV neighbour is its impeccable presentation. The trail is a ribbon of yellow through lush green fields, and ancient trees stand proudly at the venue for the 2012 London Olympics XC race. Nothing seems very TOWIE

here — you're well removed from the hectic surrounds of Southend-on-Sea, although still only a stone's throw away from the seaside tourist trap. This magical transformation from town to country gives us high hopes for the quality of the track.

Badge of honour

We're really excited at the prospect of riding a trail with such pedigree — the



WRECKING CREW WISDOM

"Hadleigh Park is a great venue and the trail rides well even in wet conditions. A lightweight 29er would be my weapon of choice to make the most out of the terrain. Get your Lycra on and seatpost up and head out for a few laps of the world-famous Olympic track. Just bear in mind that grip levels aren't great with semi-slick tyres on this death-gravel covered trail!"

ALEX EVANS **MBUK** FEATURES EDITOR



HITTING THE BERM WITH AN ENTHUSIASTIC PUMP AND A CLATTERING BIKE, TOM ACCELERATES OUT ONTO THE NEXT STRAIGHT

The trail may be smooth in the main, but the rock gardens certainly aren't



Olympics being the pinnacle of performance in most sports. Hadleigh MTB Club chairman Chris and treasurer Jez, who are both skills coaches and pretty handy on their bikes, give us a quick rundown of the track features. They explain that there are a lot of sections where you can choose between blue, red or black graded lines. Speaking to Tom Dowie, MTB coach and beard guru, whom we've invited over from Chicksands to join us for the day, it becomes clear that the riding here isn't going to be a doddle – Olly and I will have to bring out our A games. And that's after the trail has been made safer since the Olympics, with many of the bigger, pointier rocks removed.

Hitting the track, it becomes apparent that this is a trail centre on steroids with clean,

well maintained surfaces that are devoid of the usual braking bumps and ruts. Riding along the smooth, dusty trail we reach the first obstacle, Triple Trouble, a multiple-choice steep rocky chute. The hardest option has a slab jump into a steep landing made up of more rock slabs. It's a blind drop, and we come careering into it at a fair pace. Olly leads us out with great enthusiasm – too much, in fact, and overshoots it on his 29er XC race bike. Seat up, clipped in and fork and shock set up hard for pedalling, rather than big hits, he struggles to hold on, but just manages to ride out the line of rock slabs without wiping out.

Newfound respect

This sets the tone for the rest of the morning. You'd think a cross-country race track would



be fairly tame, but when you're riding a short-travel XC bike the Hadleigh course can easily catch you out. We spare a thought for the Olympians who rode this track with such aggression in the tightest Lycra known to man, many of them on hardtails. Fireroad bashing this certainly isn't.

Next up is a short pedal as we traverse around the hillside, taking in the archetypally English countryside. The Thames Estuary snakes inland through green fields, contrasting with looming industrial towers, as the vast openness of the North Sea expands beyond us on the other side. There's not much time to take this in though – Deane's Drop and the famous rock berm are soon upon us.

Tom shoots ahead down the black option, taking it in his »



The Wrecking Crew Who are we?



OLLIE FORSTER

Former MBUK staffer Ollie loves nothing more than fast and challenging trails



ALEX EVANS

Features Editor Alex is fresh from the Alps and ready to sample the UK's finest trails



GUEST RIDER

Local MTB club chairman and fully qualified coach who's handy on a 29er



GUEST RIDER

JEZ VINCE
CTC and British Cycling coach Jez sure knows how to rail the berms



GUEST RIDER

TOM DOWIE
4X racer, dirt jumper and coach Tom lets his riding and beard do the talking.



GUEST RIDER

JAMES BLACKWELL
Five feet of trouble and energy, Jimmer rides quick and talks even quicker

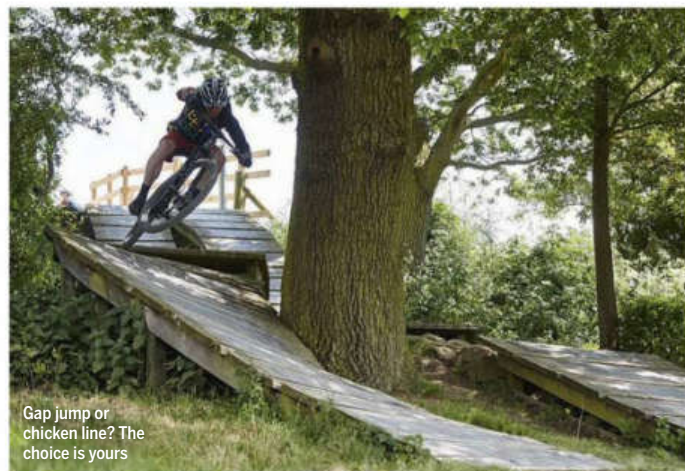


Try doing that with your post at full extension. Kudos to the XC racers!

Nothing gets you up to XC race pace faster than another rider breathing down your neck



More dusty berms than you can shake a stick at



Gap jump or chicken line? The choice is yours



Limited space meant the course builders had to get creative

stride on his slightly longer travel, 650b wheeled trail bike. Hitting the berm at the bottom with an enthusiastic pump and a clattering bike, he accelerates out onto the next straight. Chris, Jez and I decide to take the easier drifts that constitute the blue section of track. We slide gracefully around each berm, wafting up clouds of dust as our semi-slick tyres scabble for grip.

Boy racers

The dual track – a modification made to the course since the Olympics – is a great opportunity to let our bikes roll and flow through a series of turns, some bermed, some flat. It's part of the loop and comes as a welcome surprise. The corners are

broken up with flowing rollers that can be doubled or pumped as desired. This time our 29er XC bikes are in their element, making the smooth trail come alive as they slide across the gravel surface. We feel like we're hurtling down the hill as we race to the lowest part of Hadleigh Park, and Jez and Chris go head to head, friendly rivalry getting the better of their sensible sides.

Hadleigh has a lot of short descents and short climbs – it's a great way to make the most of the terrain. You never tire of climbing and are always rewarded with a fun descent on the other side. As we finish one ascent we reach the infamous Leap of Faith – the name is a nod towards the park's owners, The Salvation Army – with its

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

LOCALS DO...

- Grab a cuppa from the visitor centre
- Wear helmets at all times
- Get involved with Hadleigh MTB Club
- Give way to pedestrians on shared trails

LOCALS DON'T

- Litter the countryside
- Modify the trails leave that to the park rangers

gnarly gap to rocky landing. Tom sends it, landing near the bottom and managing to scrub enough speed off before the sharp, dusty left-hand turn around a tree. The rest of us follow, forgoing the chicken line.

Exiting out the other side, we're confronted with a short climb followed by yet another feature – there's literally no rest on this intensely fun and high-paced race track. My short-travel BMC takes the hits as I crash my way clumsily down the black route on a poorly chosen line through jagged protruding rocks. True to expectations, a climb follows the short technical section and we once again soar (well, relatively) above the Essex coastline. From the top we get a view back across »

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You've certainly earned your lunch by the time you get to the caff

THE DIRECTORY

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HADLEIGH PARK

GET THERE

Turn off the M25 at junction 30 and follow the A13 in the direction of Southend-on-Sea. In Hadleigh, turn down Castle Lane and follow it to the visitor centre. Parking is £1.50 per hour or £6 all day.

FACILITIES

Cafe, bike shop, workshop, toilets

CONTACT

Hadleigh Park, 01702 551072
www.hadleigh-park.co.uk

BIKE SHOPS

Bike Art, Thetford
www.bikeartthetford.co.uk
Cycles UK, Leigh-on-Sea
www.cyclesuk.com
Richardson's Cycles, Leigh-on-Sea
www.richardsonscycles.com

WHAT ELSE IS NEARBY?

Hockley Woods
Great XC trails to explore not far from Hadleigh Park.

Belfair Woods
Another XC venue. Link these spots together with Hadleigh for an epic day in the saddle.

Danbury
A cool place to ride, with jumps and a freeride area but also vast woodland for XC exploring.

VERDICT

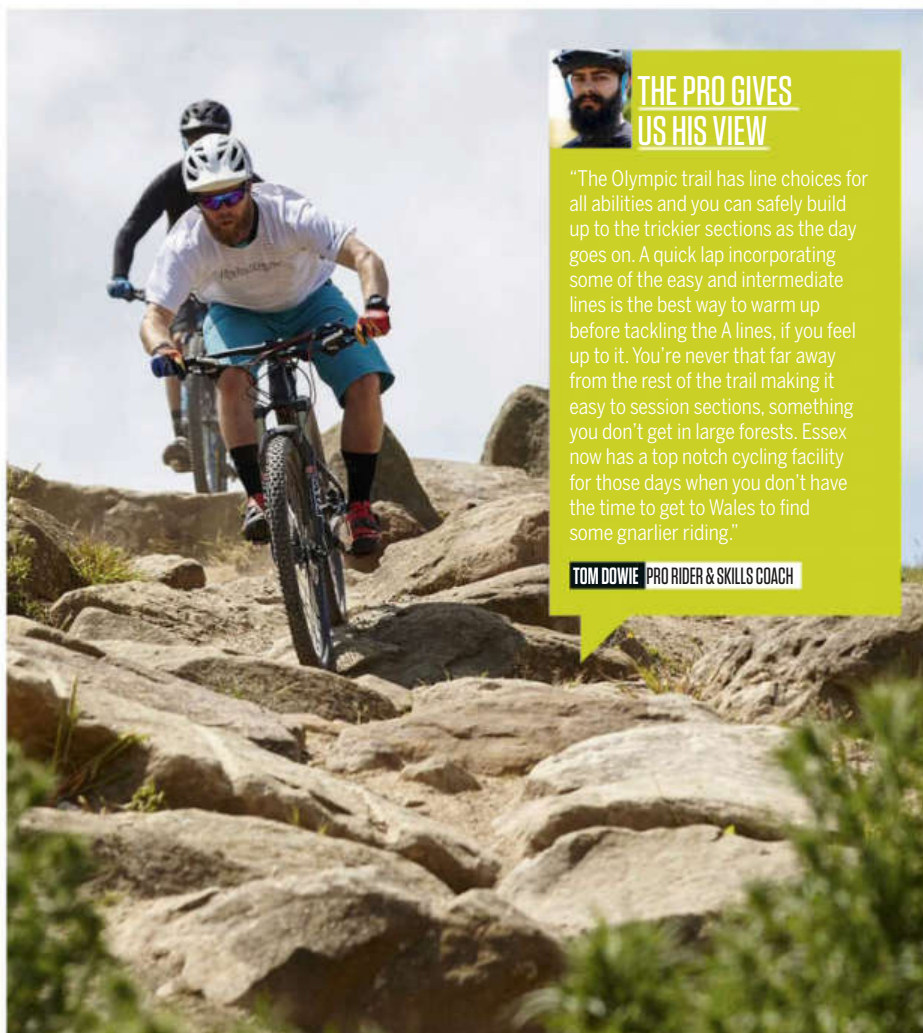
An awesome all-weather cross-country venue. Don't come here expecting to get loads of air and rack up the descents – this is an XC centre with well-maintained manmade trails. Bike up accordingly and you'll have a great time.



THE PRO GIVES US HIS VIEW

"The Olympic trail has line choices for all abilities and you can safely build up to the trickier sections as the day goes on. A quick lap incorporating some of the easy and intermediate lines is the best way to warm up before tackling the A lines, if you feel up to it. You're never that far away from the rest of the trail making it easy to session sections, something you don't get in large forests. Essex now has a top notch cycling facility for those days when you don't have the time to get to Wales to find some gnarlier riding."

TOM DOWIE PRO RIDER & SKILLS COACH



the sections we've just ridden, now looking inland. From these vantage points you can really appreciate why Hadleigh Park was chosen as the venue for the Olympic XC race. On a hot summer's day you can bask in the sunshine and absorb all the action from almost anywhere on the hillside, making it ideal for all the spectators and TV cameras in 2012.

After a few more brief climbs and interesting features we arrive back at the starting point,

all stoked on the lap's shenanigans – poor line choices, awesome drifts and impromptu racing, all on highly-strung XC bikes. It strikes us that this is a bike park for everyone. You're not forced to take the hardest lines and the black and red sections are signposted clearly as they deviate from the blue route. Someone as capable as Tom can have just as much fun as the numerous beginners we saw riding the easier sections of

trail. There's also a green family track for little 'uns.

As we roll back to the cafe to consume enormous amounts of cake, we reflect on how the area has benefitted from the Olympics. The Hadleigh MTB Club is thriving and there's an amazing scene here, which comes as no surprise with a venue as good as this on their doorstep. The next time we want to don Lycra and hustle up the hills, we'll be heading back to Hadleigh! ☺



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